

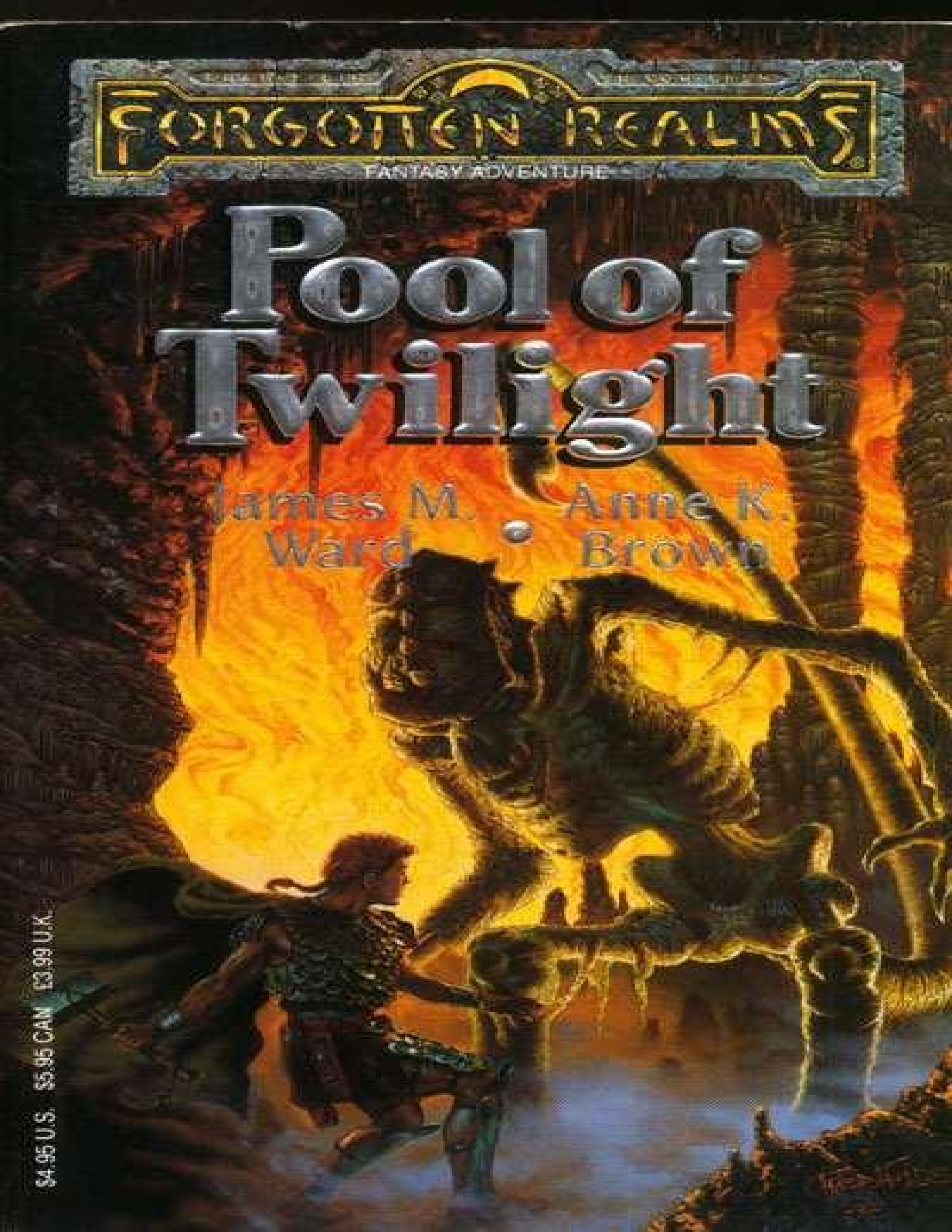
FORGOTTEN REALMS

FANTASY ADVENTURE

Pool of Twilight

James M. Ward • Anne K. Brown

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Pool of Twilight

Book 3 of the Pool Trilogy

By James M. Ward and Anne K. Brown

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This effort is dedicated to my best friend, Mike Gray, The dude probably won't even read this book, but he's a good guy anyway.

-J.M.W.

For my grandmother, Adeline Dauska, the treasure in my past; and for my daughter, Emily, the treasure in my future.

—A.K.B.

1

Dark Dreams

The paladin stood before the shadowed archway, breathing air sharp and acrid with the stench of magic. The stone ruins about him were dark and strangely distorted. The walls of the dank chambers seemed to be undulating wildly, the leprous colonnades lurching at queer angles, as if the place had been designed by a madman.

The paladin gripped a heavy, combat-worn battle-hammer firmly in one gauntleted hand, and in his other he held a white crestless shield. Before being granted a symbol of honor, a paladin had to prove his worth. This was his test.

He stepped through the archway.

Immediately he sensed it. Evil. It lingered on the air, coating him as he passed, leaving what felt like a thin, noxious layer of rancid oil on his skin. The paladin did his best to ignore it as he journeyed into the blackness. His shield gave off a faint azure radiance, lighting his way.

Yesss. .. Come to me, Hammerseeker.

The bubbling voice seemed to ooze out of the darkness from all directions, shrill and inhuman.

"Who are you?" the paladin called into the murk. The beating of his heart echoed loudly inside his steel breastplate.

Your doom!

Without warning, a pulsing crimson glow burst apart the darkness with violent light, revealing a chamber of monstrous proportions. Ponderous stone vaults, as huge and misshapen as giants, supported a ceiling lost in the crimson miasma. The walls were formed of what seemed at first to be huge oblong bricks. It was only after a moment that the paladin realized what they really were: coffins.

There were hundreds of them. No, thousands. Coffins of beaten gold and worm-eaten wood, of rune-carved stone and rotting wicker. Many were cracked and broken, their denizens hanging out of them in a thousand different states of decay, all leering at him with the ceaseless grins of death. Come, youngling! Bow to me, before I rend your limbs apart. Shadows swirled in the lofty nave of the huge chamber. The paladin approached almost against his will. He barely noticed the heaps of treasure scattered around him. Beaten silver urns shone like enormous hearts in the pulsing crimson light. Gold coffers lay broken open, their jeweled contents spilling out of them like guts.

Closer, youngling. Come gaze upon what you have given your brief and pitiful life to seek.

Blue radiance burst into life high in the nave. The paladin caught a glimpse of something hovering at the center of the diamond-hard brilliance, an object of wondrous power. Then the shadows swirled, cloaking the blessed light

And now, Hammerseeker, you die!

Something moved with terrible swiftness in the darkness of the nave. The paladin barely managed to lift his shield in time to meet the blow. He cried out as pain coursed like lightning up his arm. The white shield shuddered, then burst asunder in a spray of twisted shards. The denizens of the coffin-walls jeered at him in a horrid cacophony of teeth clattering and bone snapping.

The paladin fought down the panic clawing at his chest. "I will stand firm, Tyr!" he shouted to his god. He swung his

battlehammer in a whistling arc toward the darkness.

But his footing was not secure.

His heel skidded on coins scattered across the stone floor. His blow went wild, the hammer spinning off into the darkness as he fell to his knees. Shrill laughter bubbled from the alcove as the coffin-walls erupted in a new chorus of gleeful rattling. The paladin hung his head in defeat. He was no hero.

No, you are not, youngling. You are a fool. And now you will die a fool's death!

Midnight-dark claws slashed out of the darkness. They punched through the paladin's steel breastplate as if it were parchment. Four streaks of searing fire streaked across his chest. His body arched backward in agony. Hot blood spattered the dark stone floor. A scream ripped from his lungs.

"No! Tyr, help me! It wasn't supposed to end like this!"

There was no answer to his cry. His god had forsaken him. The shadow-shrouded being stirred again, readying its final blow.

* * * * *

"Kern, come back to us!"

A cry reached through the darkness. The voice was calm and reassuring, but faint, as if coming to him from across a vast distance.

"He can't hear you, Shal." This voice was deeper than the first, gruffer. Despite its faintness, there was a distinct edge of worry to it.

"Yes, he can. He can and will." The voice seemed to grow louder, cutting through the darkness. "You're having one of your dreams, Kern. Let it go. You have to come back to us."

He struggled to break free, but the darkness was too heavy. It pressed down upon him. He couldn't breathe. It was no use.

"Kern Miltiades Desanea, come back this instant!"

With all his might he struggled upward, toward a faint light

that shone brighter and brighter as he rose. Just when he was about to give up, he broke through the surface, and a ragged, shuddering breath filled his lungs.

"Mother... Father ..." His voice croaked like an old frog's from a throat as dry as bone dust. "It was the dream again."

He was lying in his bed in the comfortingly familiar chamber in Denlor's Tower where he had slept every night of his twenty-two years. A beautiful middle-aged woman smiled down at him. Her hair formed a flame-colored corona around her face, and her green eyes were so bright as to put emeralds to shame. An aura of magic seemed to shimmer about her. But then, she was a sorceress.

"It's all right now, Kern," Shal said, smoothing his hair—red hair, just like hers—from his forehead. "You're back with us now."

He nodded and smiled, the expression suddenly turning into a grimace of pain.

"Shal, what is it?" Tarl asked in concern. A hale, broad-shouldered man, Kern's father was still in his prime despite his snow-white hair. His sightless eyes stared blankly into the air as he reached out to lay a hand on his son.

Kern cried out in pain.

Shal's brow furrowed as she threw back the woolen blanket that covered her son. A gasp escaped her lips.

"Kern, you're wounded!"

Kern stared in astonishment. Four long gashes marked his white nightshirt. Crimson blood soaked the garment. His chest quivered as he drew shallow, painful breaths. The nightmare replayed itself in his mind. He remembered the shadow-filled nave. Something had lurked there, lashing out at him with midnight-dark talons.

"But... it was just a dream!" Kern protested. Instantly he regretted his shout as blood oozed from the gashes.

"How can this be?" Tarl asked. Gently, expertly, his fingers explored his son's injury. Tarl had been a cleric of Tyr for over three decades and had seen and healed more wounds on the

battlefield than he could ever have counted. "You've had the dream a dozen times, Kern, yet this has never happened before."

Shal laid a hand on her husband's shoulder. "Can you heal him, beloved?" Her voice was calm and controlled, but urgency shone in her green eyes.

Tarl nodded, laying both of his strong hands on Kern's chest. Briefly, the cleric shut his unseeing eyes. A prayer tumbled from his lips. "May Tyr grant me power in this time of need," he finished. A sapphire nimbus sprang to life around his hands and spread over Kern's wounds, radiating healing power.

Suddenly the magical glow vanished. Blue cobwebs drifted down in its place, covering Kern and the bed in a sticky web. Shal frowned, glancing at her husband. "When was the last time one of your healing spells went awry?"

Tarl was dumbfounded. "When I was a neophyte, about thirty years ago. I don't understand what happened. The spell was working fine, then something seemed to suck the magic right out of it." Tarl pressed his hands against the four gashes on Kern's chest, slowing the bleeding.

Kern gritted his teeth. Pain was nothing to a paladin, he reminded himself. But then, he wasn't a true paladin yet.

"What's going on?" a clear, crystalline voice asked.

A delicate young woman stood in the doorway of Kern's chamber. Between her forest green tunic and short dark hair she looked almost like a pretty but mischievous boy. Listle, Shal's apprentice, grinned impishly. "I heard something that sounded like an ogre's courting call down here and thought I'd better investigate."

She moved toward the others with a swift, smooth grace that belied her gray elven blood. Her ears were daintily pointed, her eyes silvery. Lamplight glimmered off a ruby pendant hanging from a silver chain around her throat. She halted when she saw the blood oozing between Tarl's fingers. "Kern! What happened?"

"Listle," Shal said in her steady voice, "there's a purple jar on the highest shelf in my spellcasting chamber. You'll recognize it by the star-rune on the seal. It's an ointment of healing. I want you to get it for me. Now!"

Listle nodded, her eyes wide. She spoke a few fluid words of magic, and silver sparks crackled around her feet. The elf dashed out of the chamber so swiftly her outline seemed to blur.

"I wish she wouldn't do that," Shal said with annoyance. "A swiftspell takes a year off your life every time it's cast. True, elven lifespans are long, but not so long that Listle should squander a year every time she has the whim."

"Hush, wife," Tarl said gently. "She is only trying to help Kern."

"I'll be all right" Kern said weakly. "Really."

"You be quiet!" Shal snapped.

Kern meekly clamped his mouth shut. The room was beginning to swim around him.

Moments later, Listle burst into the room like a silver comet. "I'm sorry I took so long," the elf gasped breathlessly. Her shiny hair was a raven-dark tangle, sticking out wildly in every direction. "You have a confusing variety of jars and vials, Shal."

"Did you find the ointment?"

Listle nodded, handing Shal a small purple jar. The sorceress took it, breaking the runic seal with a single word of magic.

"Now, Kern, I need you to listen to me very carefully," Shal said. Her voice was stern but reassuringly calm. "I need you to open yourself to the power of the healing ointment. Imagine that you're surrounded by a shining wall of white light, a wall that blocked your father's spell."

The young man closed his eyes and did his best to picture a shimmering wall enclosing him.

"All right, Kern, now I want you to lower the wall. Slowly. Don't rush it. Let it drop, inch by inch, until it's just a shining ring at your feet."

Kern gritted his teeth with effort. It was hard, but gradually his will won out and the imaginary wall began to shrink. It dropped to his chest, then to his knees, and finally became nothing more than a glowing circle down around his feet.

"Is it gone?"

Kern nodded, not daring to speak for fear of breaking his concentration.

"Now, beloved," Shal said to Tarl, placing the jar of ointment into the cleric's hands. With deft, practiced fingers, Tarl spread a thin layer of the clear ointment over Kern's oozing wounds. The pungent healing balm smelled of mint and juniper. Tarl set down the empty jar.

Nothing happened.

"Concentrate on the wall, Kern," Shal warned.

With a groan of effort, he held the wall down. Suddenly he felt a cool tingling in his chest. Then he could bear it no longer. He relinquished his willpower, and felt the imaginary wall spring back into place around him. But the pain in his chest was gone.

"You can open your eyes now, Son."

Kern could hear the relief in his mother's voice. Slowly he opened his eyes. He was almost surprised to see that, in truth, there was no wall of white light encasing him. He ran a hand over his chest. His bloodstained nightshirt was still in tatters, but the skin beneath was smooth and unbroken. The ointment had healed him.

He grinned weakly. "Thank you, Mother, Father," he whispered hoarsely. "You too, Listle."

The elf winked at him, beaming, but he didn't notice. In the blink of an eye, Kern had fallen asleep.

* * * * *

"I just don't understand it, Tarl!" Shal said, clenching her hand into a fist. The sorceress and her husband were alone in the main chamber of Denlor's Tower. A fire burned in a vast marble fireplace. Kern was still sleeping upstairs, and the sorceress had sent Listle to her spell-casting chamber

with a broom, hoping to keep her precocious apprentice occupied for a time.

"How, by all the gods, could he be hurt by a dream?" Now that she and Tarl were alone, Shal's voice was trembling. She leaned her head against her husband's broad chest, and he held her in his strong arms. She was a statuesque woman, taller even than Tarl—the result of an inadvertent use of a wishing ring years ago—but right now she felt small and afraid.

"All I can say is that it must be a very powerful creature that stalks his dreams," Tarl said softly.

"You think it's the warder of Tyr's hammer, don't you?"

Tarl nodded slowly. "Nothing else makes sense. Whoever plagues Kern's dreams knows that it's his destiny to find the lost hammer."

Shal sighed. Twenty-two years ago, she and Tarl had confronted a magical pool of darkness with the help of several others—including the ranger Ren o' the Blade, the sorceress Evaine, and an undead paladin named Miltiades, raised from the grave by Tyr for the purpose of the quest. Shal shivered. Even after all these years, the memory of the ordeal was still clear in her mind.

It all began when, with the help of the evil god Bane, the Red Wizard Marcus stole the entire city of Phlan, transporting it to a subterranean cavern beneath his tower. There he intended to feed the life-forces of Phlan's people to a pool of darkness in an attempt to gain enough power to become a dark deity. But Shal, Tarl, and the others had different ideas, and after they had defeated the Red Wizard, Tarl cast the legendary Hammer of Tyr into the pool, destroying the dark waters forever.

But something went awry. Before the holy relic could magically return to Tarl's hand, as it always had before, the hammer was stolen by Bane. The dark god hid it where he thought none would ever find it. Before he was summoned back to the halls of Tyr, the undead paladin, Miltiades, made

a prophecy. One day, he foretold, it would be the fate of Shal and Tarl's newborn child to lead a quest for the lost hammer. Knowledge of this prophecy they had thus far kept from their beloved son.

"By Tyr, I would go myself," Tarl said through clenched teeth.

"But how can I when . . . when ..." His broad shoulders slumped in despair as he sank down to a chair covered in gryphon leather. He buried his face in his hands. "What have I become? I cannot even protect my son in his time of need."

His voice was anguished. "What good is a blind hero, Shal?"

"Enough!" Shal said sharply. "Get all of that nonsense out of your system. Self-pity does not become you, cleric of Tyr."

A look of surprise crossed Tarl's face. "You're right, of course," he said huskily. "I suppose I should be thankful I'm alive at all. So many of the temple's clerics have perished these last years. I have no right to complain."

The last five years had been hard ones for the good clerics of Phlan. When the hammer was first stolen by Bane, few had realized how dire the consequences would truly be. The hammer had been the heart of the temple's power, and, without the holy relic, the temple's protective aura had gradually diminished. The warding spells woven about its walls were no longer reliable proof against the scourges of unholy magic sent by enemies of the God of Justice. The clerics of Tyr were dying, one by one. A year ago, Tarl himself had nearly succumbed. It was only a great strength, and an even greater faith in his god, that had preserved him. But he did not escape unscarred—he was struck blind. Tarl knew that it was only a matter of time before the temple's defenses would fail altogether, and on that day all the clerics of Tyr would perish.

Unless Tyr's hammer was returned.

"Never forget, husband," Shal said softly, "you are the same man you always were. Nothing has changed that."

He found her face with his hands and kissed her soundly.

"What good could I possibly have done in my life to deserve

you, Shal?"

"Oh, I can think of a thing or two," she said with a devilish smile.

* * * * *

Kern groaned as he dragged himself out of bed.

"How do you ever expect to fight real monsters, Kern, if dream ones can knock the stuffing out of you so easily?"

Kern shot Listle a withering glance. Between his mother's healing ointment and a night's dreamless rest, he was almost as good as new. Put the emphasis on almost, he thought with a wince as he shrugged on a tunic the color of mist. His chest was so sore he felt as if he had been hugged by an over-friendly owlbear.

"By the way, your mother wants to see you."

"About what?" Kern asked. He grimaced as he pulled on his boots.

The elf did a poor job of stifling a giggle. "How should I know?" she asked.

"It's funny," Kern grumbled, "but I always thought elves were supposed to be stately, regal, polite beings."

"Well, thinking never was your strong point," Listle retorted.

With a glare, Kern brushed past her and headed for his mother's chamber. As he trudged up the tower's central staircase, he wondered why Shal wanted to see him. She didn't usually invite him into her spellcasting chamber. In fact, her private laboratory was generally off-limits to everyone except Listle. She probably wanted to talk about his recurring nightmares, he thought.

He had dreamed about the beast in the darkness a number of times before, and each time the dream had been a little clearer and lasted a little longer. He tried to recall the details of yesterday's nightmare, but already it seemed foggy. He remembered a shadowed nave and a terrible creature. The beast had called him something. What was it? A title of some sort... Kern shook his head. The memory was too clouded.

The young man had a feeling that his mother and father knew something about the nightmare that they weren't telling him. They seemed ill at ease every time he told them he had dreamed the same dream. Were they trying to protect him from something?

He sighed. It wasn't easy being the only son of two of the city of Phlan's greatest heroes. Once, with the help of Kern's honorary Uncle Ren, Tarl and Shal had defeated an evil dragon that tyrannized half the city, which in those days was rife with monsters and ruins. And another time, they had helped to rescue Phlan from an evil Red Wizard named Marcus, who had stolen the city and sealed it in a cavern beneath his tower. Kern didn't know how he could ever live up to the examples set by parents like that.

"There you are," Shal said as her son stepped into the circular chamber where she studied and practiced her magical skills. Once the chamber had been used by a powerful wizard named Denlor, a friend of Shal's old master, but after his death Shal had taken it over. While Shal insisted that the rest of the tower be spotless, this room was always cluttered. Shelves lined the walls, sagging under their load of leather-bound books and rune-sealed jars. Countless tables were strewn with crisp rolls of parchment, bright purple quill pens, and crystal pots of invisible ink. Bunches of dried herbs hung from the rafters, lending the air a sweet, dusty scent.

"Sit," Shal said briskly. Kern did as ordered. His mother approached him with a clear crystal in hand, her violet robe whispering against the stone floor.

"What is that?" Kern asked, eyeing the crystal warily. He was more than a little suspicious of his mother's magic powers. He had seen her cast a spell and engulf entire bands of attacking orcs in searing flame. It was generally a good idea to avoid being on the receiving end of her incantations.

"It's a test. I want to find out why your father's spell failed to heal you. Now stop squirming and hold still."

She spoke several strange words. Suddenly the crystal glowed with a crimson radiance. The scarlet glow reached out to envelop a heavy spellbook on a nearby table. The sorceress nodded in satisfaction.

"Does it detect magic?" Kern asked tentatively.

"That's right," Shal said. "Now it's your turn." She brought the crystal closer to Kern. The scarlet glow reached out for him, probing. But as soon as the radiance touched his chest, it abruptly vanished. The crystal went dark, disintegrating into a fine gray powder that trickled from Shal's hand.

She raised an eyebrow, gazing speculatively at her son.

"What?" Kern asked defensively. "What is it?"

"This is a problem," Shal said. She took a troubled breath.

"Oh, I've suspected it for some time now. Why do you think I always tell you to stay away from my chamber when I'm working on a spell?" She dusted the remnants of the crystal from her hands. "This confirms everything."

"Confirms what?" Kern asked in utter desperation.

"You are unmagic, Kern." Her face grew serious. "It's my fault, of course. I cast a number of powerful spells while I was pregnant with you. I would have rather not cast them but was forced to in order to save your father, as well as the city of Phlan. Now it seems they have affected you, though I'm not yet sure if the effect is permanent, or even if it will be consistent from one day to the next."

Kern's head was spinning. "Affected me in what way?"

"Magic doesn't work on you, Kern. Now, this might not actually be all bad. It means you're immune to harmful spells. But it also means you're immune to magical healing as well, like the spell your father tried to cast on you after your strange nightmare,"

Kern groaned in dismay. "Isn't there something you can do to fix things?"

"Well, we can help you practice lowering your magical guard." Shal smiled reassuringly at her son. "It won't solve the problem, but it may help."

Before Kern could reply, Listle burst into the room. A flurry of silver sparks followed in her wake. Shal scowled at the elf's flagrant use of her swiftness spell.

The elf grinned sheepishly. "I know I wasn't supposed to cast another one," Listle said excitedly, "but I thought this was too important to wait"

"What is it, Listle?" Kern asked.

Her silvery eyes were positively glowing. "It's the clerics at the temple," she exclaimed. "They've solved Bane's riddle!"

Kern stared at the elf uncomprehendingly.

She rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Don't you see, you ogre-brained oaf? They've discovered where the Hammer of Tyr is hidden!"

2

A Riddle Answered

Weighted down by his heavy armor, Kern hurriedly descended the tower's central staircase. As a paladin-aspirant, tradition required that he don full armor before visiting the temple of Tyr. That included a heavy shirt of chain mail, a breastplate of beaten steel, and greaves to match. Over this he wore the tabard of pure, unblemished white that marked him as a supplicant to the Order of Paladins. At his side hung the worn battlehammer he used for practice.

He tried to adjust his heavy chain mail shirt, but no matter how much he jerked and twisted, the armor still seemed to pinch him under the arms. He found Tarl already waiting for him downstairs, Shal at his side. The two were in the middle of an intent conversation, which was broken off abruptly when Kern entered the room.

Before he could wonder what they had been discussing, Tarl spoke exuberantly.

"The temple's sages have been trying to solve the riddle of the hammer for twenty-two years. Are you as curious as I am, Son, to learn if they have discovered an answer at last?"

Kern nodded. "I'm ready, Father."

"And so am I," a sparkling voice said behind Kern.

He whirled just in time to see Listle step blithely through a wall of solid stone, the ruby pendant she always wore winking brightly.

"Must you do that?" the young warrior asked with a frown.

"Must I do what, Kern?" the elf replied innocently.

Kern gritted his teeth, unwilling to give her the satisfaction of a reply. Listle had the disconcerting habit of stepping through walls and other seemingly solid objects when one least expected it. Shal considered the elf's ability to pass through solid matter a magical curiosity. Kern just considered it a nuisance. He stepped forward, opening the tower's door.

"Be careful," Shal admonished them, her eyes grim.

"Remember, Phlan isn't the safe haven it used to be."

The three promised to be cautious and stepped outside.

Denlor's Tower stood on the north edge of Phlan, but the temple of Tyr was located in the central city, so they had a fair distance to walk. It was a chill, gray day. Autumn had arrived early, and winter also promised to be premature. Lately, when Kern looked out of his chamber's window in the morning, he could see a thin white line of ice where the steely waters of the Moonsea met the beach.

Kern firmly gripped Tarl's elbow, guiding his blind father, while Listle bounded ahead with her typical ebullience. They turned onto a narrow street, and the comforting sight of Denlor's Tower was lost from view. Shal had been right to caution them to take care, Kern thought to himself. Over the last several years, Phlan had undergone a steady decline. Everyone knew the mysterious malaise was due to the growing crisis of the lost relic. As surely as the clerics of Tyr were dying, so was Phlan, street by street and person by person.

In Kern's childhood memories, Phlan had been a city of broad, tree-lined avenues, neatly kept stone cottages, and broad cobbled squares centered around clear-water

fountains. The Phlan of today was starkly different. Dark, sour-smelling water ran down the center of most streets, their cobblestones cracked and covered with refuse and slime. In places the cobbles were gone altogether, leaving gaping holes filled with foul-smelling muck churned up by the hooves of horses. The trees that arched over the avenues were dead, their brittle branches sagging down like skeletal fingers. Brick smokestacks belched forth black, sulfurous clouds that stained the sky above, turning its once bright azure to an angry iron gray. Now when it rained in Phlan, the rain was gritty and dark, the color of ashes.

As they walked, Kern noted that the houses slumping to either side of the avenue were squalid and filthy. Hard-faced women dumped their dirty dishwater out of second-story windows, heedless of who might be walking below. Shifty-eyed men clad in mud-stained tunics congregated in the doorways of abandoned buildings, watching travelers pass, now and then baring yellowed teeth in smiles that were anything but neighborly. Kern did his best to steer clear.

"Tell me truthfully, Kern," Tarl said as the three of them walked. "How does the city look?"

On his honor, Kern could not lie, though his heart was heavy. He knew how much the city meant to his father. "Worse," the young warrior said sadly. "With all the soot and shadows, it looks more like twilight than midday." He gave wide berth to a tattered pile of refuse lying in the gutter only to realize that it was a corpse, half-eaten by rats, with a rusted knife sticking out of its back. He muttered a quick prayer to Tyr as he hastened past, glad Tarl could not see the foul sight.

A scream echoed in the distance, a man's wordless cry of agony. Abruptly, it was cut short. Wicked laughter drifted down from open windows above, followed by the sound of men fighting. Coarse voices shouted curses so vile they made Kern's ears turn red. None of this, however, seemed to bother Listle, who scampered cheerfully along.

Tarl shook his head ruefully. "This is a dark time, Kern. I'm

sorry you've had to grow to manhood during these last years. And I'm sorry that you have come to stay with us at such a black time in Phlan's history, Listle Onopordum. Without the hammer, the temple of Tyr is losing its power. And without the temple, the city will lose its way."

A group of beggars shuffled by, swathed in rancid-smelling rags. Quickly Kern reached for the leather purse at his belt. He distributed what money he had, but there were more hands than coins. The beggars trudged on without a word of gratitude, their listless expressions unchanged. A putrid odor lingered in their wake, the scent of rot and death.

"Why don't the people of Phlan fight to win their city back?" Listle asked. The elf stepped nimbly over an oozing pile of garbage, shaking her head in disgust. "I thought the citizens of Phlan were supposed to be some of the greatest fighters in Faerun. They've been attacked by armies of evil countless times over the centuries—from goblins and orcs to trolls and giants—and never once has the city been defeated. Now it looks as if the Death Gates are going to collapse simply out of neglect. The next army of ogres won't even have to bother breaking them down."

Kern shuddered at the thought.

"We can't blame the people of Phlan for being led astray, Listle," Tarl said reprovingly. "It isn't their fault. The influence of dark magic is everywhere now. I can feel it in my heart like a great black weight. Without the hammer, the clerics of Tyr no longer have the power to protect the people from evil or to banish the darkness from the city. But we should not despair. There are still a few folk in the city who seek the light and ask for the blessing of Tyr. Let us just hope that Patriarch Anton and the others have not solved Bane's riddle too late. If the Hammer of Tyr can be found, the city might yet be saved."

Looking at the grim scene around him, Kern was not so sure. He kept his free hand on the frayed leather grip of his battlehammer as they pressed on.

"By the way, Kern," Tarl continued, "don't let me forget to tell Patriarch Anton about this trait of yours, this unmagic as your mother calls it. I confess, I often wondered why I was never able to catch the slightest glimpse of you, even after placing that enchantment on your armor. Now it appears I have an explanation."

Despite his blindness, Tarl had the peculiar ability to "see" magic. It was a talent that had developed gradually over the last several years. At first, Tarl had only been able to detect a faint glow each time Shal cast a spell near him. Eventually, he began to see magical auras as glowing clouds of light. Now his talent had grown to the point where he could not only detect all sorts of magical energies, he could discern their true natures as well.

So, Kern realized with a start, because of his magical resistance he would always remain invisible to his father. That saddened the young paladin. He gripped Tarl's arm more tightly.

A sly look touched the cleric's face then. "Listle, of course, glows with such a brilliant silver color that I can hardly bear to look at her sometimes. Though the hue is exceedingly lovely, of course."

"Why thank you, Tarl," Listle replied, positively beaming. "That's the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me."

The trio passed an unsavory-looking tavern, a place by the cheery name of The Bloated Corpse, if Kern read the peeling, weatherworn sign correctly. Raucous laughter drifted through the portal, along with the stench of cheap ale and blood.

"Next time, dog, if you can't pay with gold, you can pay with your ears instead!" a coarse voice bellowed from inside the place.

Abruptly a small, scroungy man came flying out of the doorway, landing in a heap right at Kern's feet. The young warrior nearly fell backward in an effort not to collide with him. Kern recovered his balance, then reached down to help

the man, a mangy, cross-eyed fellow with a face like a rat's, to his feet. He gazed at Kern with an expression of abject terror.

"Are you all right?" Kern asked him.

"By all the bloody gods of darkness, leave me be!" the scrawny man squealed. He squirmed from Kern's grip and dashed away, disappearing down a side alley.

Kern stared in shock. He had never before heard the gods of evil invoked in Phlan.

"Pleasant fellow," Listle noted dryly.

Kern shook his head. "I was only trying to help."

"You can't help him," spoke a husky voice. Kern spun in surprise to see a barmaid leaning against the tavern's doorway. "He sold himself to the gods of evil a long time ago," the woman went on with a hoarse, throaty laugh. "Now he has nothing left to sell to pay off his gambling debts." The barmaid might have been pretty once, but her weary face was smeared with dirt, and the grimy bodice of the ragged gray dress she wore had slipped disconcertingly low.

"I'm sorry," was all Kern could think to say.

The woman eyed him calculatingly. "Well, if you're so interested in helping someone," she crooned, advancing on him, "perhaps you could help me, my handsome warrior."

Listle glared at her. "Come on, Kern, let's get out of here."

The elf jerked his arm viciously. Kern and Tarl were practically dragged down the street by the sorceress's apprentice. "I don't think you'd want to give her the kind of 'help' she's looking for."

Kern heard the barmaid cackle behind him, but there was no mirth in the sound.

"Listen to your little friend, warrior!" the woman called after him. "You'd better hurry on to your precious temple. This part of town is no place for the pure of heart. Then again, no part of this town is anymore!"

The three hurried on. Tarl had fallen silent, a pained expression on his face. The city's degeneration wounded the

cleric of Tyr deeply.

Finally the thick stone walls of the temple of Tyr hove into view. The massive temple was a welcome sight. It had been built several decades ago, the first step in an attempt to reclaim and civilize the monster-infested ruins that in those days was Phlan. As such, it was as much a citadel as temple. The high stone walls were dotted with arrow slits and topped by machicolations, openings located beneath the wall's crenelations through which hot pitch or other unpleasant substances could be rained down onto attackers. Behind the walls rose the bulk of the temple, a square, utilitarian building of dark stone topped by a single gleaming dome of bronze. Kern allowed himself to breathe a sigh of relief as he led the way toward the temple's gates.

Suddenly, four raggedly clad men stumbled out from a side alley. They were laughing coarsely, as if they had just shared a particularly bawdy joke. The men lurched directly in Kern's path. Their laughter vanished in a heartbeat, along with their drunken manner. All four were sober and quite well armed.

A big shaggy man with one eye leveled a rusted broadsword at Kern. "Give us all your gold, boy, and maybe you and your mates here will keep your heads."

Kern moved swiftly in front of Listle to protect her, hefting his battlehammer.

"Kern," the elf hissed in annoyance, "it's nice that you're such a gentleman, but I can't cast a spell if you're blocking my view."

"Looky here," sneered another of the robbers with a leer. "The puppy in the armor has a hammer. Maybe he wants us to use it to pound in some coffin nails."

Kern raised his weapon, inwardly calling upon Tyr for strength. Four to one were bad odds, but he had to do his best to protect Listle and Tarl.

Before Kern could act, Tarl stepped past him.

"Why don't you try me first, ruffian?" Tarl taunted in his

booming voice. "Being blind, I can't imagine I'd be much of a challenge for you." Kern stared at his father in horror.

The leader of the cutthroats laughed. "Suit yourself, old man." The robber raised his rusty sword.

With astonishing swiftness, Tarl reached out and grabbed the robber's hand. Deftly, the blind cleric twisted the man's arm behind him. The sword clattered to the cobblestones. Tarl gave a quick jerk and was rewarded with a sharp snap. The robber screamed in agony and slumped to the street, cradling his broken arm. A fierce grin broke across Tarl's face.

"Next?" the white-haired cleric of Tyr inquired.

Apparently there was some confusion as to whose turn it was, for the remaining robbers collided with each other as they swiftly turned tail in order to flee.

"Hey, wait for me!" their leader cried out with anguish, scrambling to his feet to hurry after his confederates.

" 'Old man' indeed!" Tarl snorted, flexing his powerful shoulders. "I don't need eyes to deal with curs like that. My nose works well enough. I don't think that fellow has ever heard of the adage 'cleanliness is next to holiness.' "

Kern gazed at his father with pride. Sighted or not, Tarl was not a man to be trifled with.

They reached the temple's gates without further incident. Two fully armored clerics standing guard allowed them to pass, and they crossed a vast courtyard to the temple proper.

A dozen marble columns supported a facade which was carved with friezes depicting a stern-faced Tyr. The god, who was missing his right hand, was dispensing justice to figures that knelt before him. The pleas of some were answered with riches, those of others with jagged lightning bolts.

"Tyr's a rather gloomy-looking fellow, isn't he?" Listle noted apprehensively as they ascended the temple's steps.

"He's the God of Justice, Listle," Kern replied in annoyance.

"Somehow I don't think it would have the same impact on

the unjust if he were a kindly old man with a sweet smile and pockets full of candy."

"Maybe not," Listle agreed. "But then, I'm all in favor of candy."

The three passed through a columned portico and found themselves beneath the temple's bronze-gilded dome in a great circular hall of gray stone. The floor was decorated with an intricate mosaic depicting Tyr's symbol: scales resting on a warhammer, with which Tyr weighed the arguments for and against those seeking redemption.

"Tarl!" a deep voice boomed, resounding off the soaring andesite vaults. A burly cleric, with a grizzled, iron-colored beard and wearing a traditional white robe, came striding across the room. "I'm glad you could be here on this auspicious day, Brother." Patriarch Anton, oldest and foremost of the temple's clerics, gripped Tarl's forearms warmly. "You also, Kern. I'm sure you will want to—"

"Ahem. Aren't you forgetting someone, Patriarch Anton?" Listle piped up.

Anton glowered darkly at being interrupted, but after Listle shot a winning smile at the old patriarch, he let out a rumbling laugh despite himself. It was the elf's dimples, of course. It was impossible to be angry at someone with dimples, and Listle's were superior examples. They allowed her to get away with all sorts of impertinences.

"Yes, Listle Onopordum, you are welcome as well," Anton rumbled amiably. "Though I wonder if I would be able to keep you away even if you were not."

Listle thought about that for a moment. "Probably not," she decided.

The patriarch led the three to a group of white-robed clerics clustered about a long mahogany table. It looked as if all the temple's clerics were there, about thirty altogether. Five years ago there would have been three score clerics and a half-dozen young men and women besides Kern wearing the white tabard of the paladin-aspirant. Few new disciples had

taken the places of the clerics of Tyr who had been struck down, one by one, over these last years.

"This way, Brother Tarl." Anton led the blind cleric to the table. "Come, hear what we've learned."

In the center of the table, a huge book rested on a cushion of black velvet. Kern had seen it on several prior occasions: a tome five handspans across, bound in the dusky, scaly leather of some unnameable beast. Within its crackling pages of ancient, yellowed parchment were thirteen terrible prophecies written by the dark god Bane himself over a thousand years ago. Its pages foretold in horrible detail some of the suffering and misery that Bane would bring to Faerun. Kern had heard the story of the book, called The Oracle of Strife, and how it came to the temple, many times. Legend held that long, long ago, the god Bane wished to know how much of the world would one day fall under his evil dominion. He went to his wicked sister, the goddess Shar, mistress of the dark. Shar concocted a potion from the fabric of midnight, the very moment of time between one day and the next, when magic is at its most powerful and the future most easily deciphered. Bane drank the potion, but such was its power that the god was plunged into a delirium. It was in this fevered state that Bane penned the thirteen prophecies included in The Oracle of Strife.

For long centuries, the book was lost to the world. Then, some three hundred years ago, an itinerant cleric of Tyr happened upon the tome in the ruins of a temple of Bane deep in the primeval forests west of the Moonsea. Eventually the book was delivered to the custodianship of the temple of Tyr in Phlan. It was a relic of fearsome evil, and the clerics locked it away under powerful wards to keep it out of the hands of those with sinister intentions.

During the last century, the book had been all but forgotten. But after Bane had heinously usurped the Hammer of Tyr, one of the temple's sages remembered the tome. The book was brought out for study. It was then that the temple's

sages discovered that one of the thirteen prophecies concerned the theft of the hammer as well as its subsequent hiding place. After that, long, frustrating years of studying the prophecy ensued. Years that— apparently—had now finally come to an end.

"It was only recently we realized that not all of the prophecies in the tome pleased Bane," Patriarch Anton explained. His gaze moved to a wizened woman with eyes as dark and shining as obsidian. "Why don't you tell them what you have learned, Sister Sendara?" Sendara was the temple's augur, and an expert on the matter of prophecy. The ancient cleric nodded. "The key lies in the Time of Troubles," Sendara began. "It has been thirteen years now since that great conflagration shook Faerun, when Bane was destroyed, along with his brethren, the dark gods Myrkul and Bhaal. I now have reason to believe that Bane predicted his own demise in The Oracle of Strife."

A murmur of surprise rippled about the table.

Sendara continued in her rich, strong voice. "As we know, Bane was in a deep trance when he penned the prophecies. I think it is conceivable that he had no control over what emerged. Thus it was that he could not help but foresee his failures as well as his victories. Everyone who has studied the tome knows that the last prophecy is almost illegible. It looks as if Bane crossed it out in anger after he recovered from his delirium. I had always assumed that it was simply because he wasn't pleased with his poetic achievement on that one." Sendara gave a sharp-edged smile. "Bane was quite puffed-up about his poetry, despite the fact that it's dreadful stuff. But from the few words I am able to decipher, I feel certain that this prophecy concerns Bane's downfall. Apparently that is why he tried to deface it. Bane thought if he obscured the prophecy, such a fated thing wouldn't come to pass."

"He was very wrong about that!" Listle whispered to Kern with a snort.

"Hush!" he hissed back, elbowing her for emphasis.

Brother Dameron, a young, round-faced cleric with a rather expansive paunch, joined in the explanation. "Sister Sendara's insights gave me an idea," he told the others. "If Bane had attempted to deface one prophecy that displeased him, wouldn't he have tried the same with others? Perhaps he might even have changed small details that annoyed him. To answer that query, I performed a modest experiment on the prophecy concerning the hammer."

Here Brother Dameron reached out and opened the book on the table to a place marked by a black silk ribbon. Kern noticed that silver holy symbols stood at each corner of the table—wards to keep the evil of the book from tainting those who studied it. Dameron turned to the last page of the prophecy of the hammer.

"If you look very closely, you can just make out a series of fine scratch marks in the parchment, along with a few tiny flecks of ink. They're so faint we did not notice them earlier. Now that I've studied it, there's no mistaking the conclusion." The sage paused dramatically. "Several lines have been scoured from the parchment with erasing sand. There's no reason to believe that it was anyone but Bane himself who did this. And that means the missing lines must say something Bane did not want revealed."

"The hiding place of the Hammer of Tyr?" Tarl asked intently.

"Exactly."

Caught up in the excitement, Kern blurted out without thinking, "But if Bane scrubbed out the lines a thousand years ago, how can we use them to learn where he hid the hammer?"

Immediately Kern realized that he, a mere paladin-aspirant, had interrupted one of the temple's most august clerics. His cheeks flushed crimson.

"I think Brother Dameron has found a solution to that dilemma, my impatient young paladin." There was a note of kindly humor in Anton's voice. "If, of course, you would be so

good as to permit him the opportunity to indulge us with the news."

"Of course," Kern managed to sputter despite his mortification. Listle glanced at him smugly.

"Thank you," Dameron said, winking at Kern. He drew a small jar from his pocket. Unstoppering it, he took out a pinch of colorless powder and sprinkled it carefully over the page. Gradually, a faint shine began to creep across the cracked and yellowed parchment. The shimmering grew brighter, forming spidery lines and swirling whorls. Kern gasped. The magical glow had outlined a dozen lines of cryptic-looking runes.

"Bane erased the true ending of the prophecy," Dameron explained. "But as any apprentice scribe copying tomes for his or her master knows, no matter how hard one scours, traces of ink always remain on the paper."

Listle grimaced, nodding. Shal was always giving her stacks of magical books to copy, and the elf's mistress was nothing less than a perfectionist. A stray drop of ink usually meant she had to recopy the entire page.

"The powder I sprinkled on the parchment causes those remaining, almost invisible, flecks of ink to glimmer," Dameron concluded. "And thus we are able to read a part of the prophecy we never knew existed."

"I, too, can read it!" Tarl said in wonderment. Kern looked at his father in surprise. Then he understood. The runes on the page were glowing with magical light. They would be vivid to his father.

"The language is archaic." Tarl's pale eyebrows knitted together as he studied the tome intently. "And you're right, Sendara, the verse is atrocious. But I think I can translate it:

When winter comes with magic wild,
Then must the Seeker go
To a riven tower of magic red,
Where a city was shackled below.
With him must come four heroes,

No less and neither no more
To battle the lurking Warder
For this relic of ancient lore.
Though dark may fall before them,
Their strife has just begun,
For awaiting them still is the twilight pool's
Shadowed guardian."

Tarl looked up from his reading in surprise. "It makes reference to the ruins of the red tower, yes? Where the Red Wizard Marcus imprisoned the city of Phlan twenty-two years ago."

Patriarch Anton nodded, scratching his grizzled gray beard. "That's what we infer. And what's more, this year, in the reckoning of the kings of Cormyr, is the Year of Wild Magic. The prophecy is clear on this point. If we are ever going to retrieve the hammer, it must be now."

Kern looked at Listle excitedly, forgetting her annoying habits for the moment. She returned his look with eagerness.

Tarl drew himself up to his full height. "Then may I formally remind my brothers and sisters of the prophecy of Miltiades, that most noble of Tyr's paladins?"

Murmurs of ascent followed Tarl's request Kern wondered what his father was referring to. All he knew was that Miltiades was a legendary paladin Tyr had once raised from the grave to help save Phlan.

"Before Miltiades was called back to Tyr's halls, he spoke of one destined to be called Hammerseeker."

Kern leaned forward, anxious to hear the lucky cleric's name. "And who is to be the Hammerseeker?" Patriarch Anton intoned ceremoniously.

Tarl drew in a deep breath. "The name of the Hammerseeker is Kern Miltiades Desanea!" His deep voice reverberated about the temple.

Listle's silvery eyes nearly popped out of her head.

Tarl smiled proudly at his son.

Kern gaped at his father in utter astonishment as all eyes turned expectantly toward him.

"Who?" he blurted in an unexpectedly squeaky voice. "Me?"

3

Mysterious foes

The huge assassin called Slayer strode into the smoky subterranean hall and surveyed the gathered throng with cruel eyes, his lips curling back from his strong white teeth in a feral grin. It looked as if every last member of Phlan's guild of thieves had answered the call, from the scroungiest cutpurse to the deadliest killer. Over three hundred men and women stood before Slayer, and all of them were his to command. The old fools of the temple of Tyr had seen their last sunrise.

"I have a gift for you, thieves of Phlan!" Slayer proclaimed in his booming voice. "From Guildmaster Sirana herself. You would do well not to refuse it."

He gestured to a huge, misshapen heap before him, covered with a rough cloth the color of old blood. At his signal, a trio of thieves leaped forward to pull back the cloth, revealing a pile of ebony armor. Next to it was a stack of long swords as dark and polished as onyx.

"With these weapons, we will crush the wretched clerics and seize the tome that points the way to the Hammer of Tyr—and the riches Bane is said to have buried with that relic. Clad yourselves in this armor and take up these swords, thieves of Phlan, and I promise you, you will fight as you never have before!"

The thieves eyed Slayer hesitantly. He had been second-in-command of the thieves' guild for no more than three moons, and many were still wary of him.

Slayer watched them scornfully. "Now!" he thundered, drawing himself up to his full seven feet. The soot-covered rafters shook with the force of his voice, and his dark eyes blazed with menace. Clad all in black leather, he was a commanding figure.

The resistance of the thieves broke. Swiftly they pressed forward, grabbing breastplates as smooth as beetle carapaces and swords as sleek as adders. Most of them were at a loss as to how to don the armor, and they stared at the weapons in confusion. Thieves were usually creatures of stealth and trickery, not warriors.

"We're cutthroats, Slayer, not bone-brained fighters!" a voice sneered over the din. "Or did you forget that, just as you and your foul mistress have forgotten so many of our other traditions?"

Slayer turned his dark gaze toward a wiry man with a shaved head and an eye lost in a mass of scar tissue. Kankorlin. He had been loyal to Bercan, the guildmaster Sirana had murdered three months before. Kankorlin had been whispering against Sirana ever since she seized command of the guild. Now he had finally summoned the courage to speak out.

"I for one won't wear this junk!" Kankorlin tossed down a breastplate in disgust and turned to the assembled thieves. "We can't lumber up to the temple in these. Fine targets we'll make for the spells of those idiot clerics."

Murmurs of agreement drifted through the hall.

"Is that so, Kankorlin?" Slayer replied, his voice as smooth as oil. "Well, if you don't care to wear the armor, you certainly don't have to."

Kankorlin smiled at his easy victory. However, his pleasure was short-lived.

With an idle flick of his black-gloved hand, Slayer sent an inky sphere of magic hurtling toward Kankorlin. It struck the wiry thief directly in the chest. There was a sizzling sound and a smell of burning flesh as the thief was propelled backward and crushed against a granite wall. The other thieves stared in shock as the remnants of Kankorlin's body slid to the floor, still smoking.

"Who else prefers not to don the armor?" Slayer inquired.

Three hundred thieves less one scrambled to strap on the

onyx breastplates.

With a flourish, Slayer raised his own suit of black armor in one hand. Fiery sparks sped from his fingertips to engulf the ebony armor. In the blink of an eye the suit magically melded to his body. The metal conformed tightly to his muscles, fitting him like a second skin.

As the thieves strapped on the black armor, they noted the slippery, greasy quality of the metal. As the form-fitting metal covered each wearer from neck to ankle, a subtle transformation took place. Each thief suddenly became a little bulkier, more muscular. Faces grew harder and coarser; brutish gleams ignited in every pair of eyes. Slayer stroked his well-oiled beard, most pleased. Sirana's enchanted armor seemed to be everything she had promised it would be.

Suddenly the torches dimmed as a chill gust of wind coursed through the hall. Slayer sensed Sirana's shadow minions approaching. His mistress must have finished her incantations in her nearby spellcasting chamber.

The torches guttered and died, plunging the hall into darkness. The sound of wings echoed like heartbeats. Suddenly nine pairs of feral red eyes appeared in the dim surface of the west wall. The burning eyes drifted toward the armored thieves.

Several of the thieves produced flares, and the resulting green glow revealed fiends such as the onlookers had never imagined existed. Spinagons on clawed feet strode boldly into the hall, moving with a queer reptilian grace, their leathery wings flapping lazily behind them. There were nine of the fell beasts, each bearing a long, wickedly barbed spear. The weapons sizzled with flame, sparks flying from their steel tips, scorching the air with the reek of burned hair. Had the beasts appeared ten minutes before, the thieves would have fled in terror. But the magical armor had hardened their hearts as well as their bodies. The thieves showed no fear of Sirana's otherworldly minions. The fiends snarled at the green flares, thick drool oozing from serrated

fangs.

"We have been summoned from our plane of existence," the fiends hissed in unison. "Who are we to kill?"

"Whom I tell you to kill," Slayer spat.

Their eyes flared with hatred, but the spinagons bowed their heads in submission. They had no choice; Sirana controlled them with her powerful magic.

"All of Tyr's clerics must die!" Slayer bellowed to the crowd.

"And we must capture the book that reveals the way to Tyr's hammer. Our reward will be untold riches." The huge man raised a fist on high. "Are you with me, thieves of Phlan?"

As one, the magically armored thieves raised their dark swords, eyes gleaming with curiously blank ferocity as they shouted their battle cries.

* * * * *

Anton and Tarl had sat Kern down on a hard marble bench. The young paladin was still dazed. Listle hovered nearby with an expression that was an equal mixture of concern, wonder, and amusement.

"I'm sorry you had to hear of Miltiades' prophecy like this, Son." Tarl gripped Kern's shoulder tightly. "Shal and I had planned to tell you next year."

Anton spoke in his rumbling baritone. "I'm afraid these dark times will force him to become a man a little sooner than you had wished, Tarl." The big cleric knelt to look directly in Kern's eyes. His shaggy mien was solemn. "I will not lie to you, Kern. The search for Tyr's hammer will be a perilous quest. Should you accept your destiny as Hammerseeker, there is a chance that you might never return to Phlan." Anton took a deep breath. "Never has a paladin-aspirant been given such a momentous task. But Tyr himself has chosen you, lad."

Kern's heart seemed to be fluttering inside his steel breastplate like a frightened sparrow. Why was he the one destined to find the Hammer of Tyr?

Anton rose to his feet. "Kern Desanea," the cleric intoned

ceremoniously, "will you accept the title of Hammerseeker and quest for the lost Hammer of Tyr?"

Kern nodded jerkily, his face pale. A year ago, on the day he had become a paladin-aspirant, he had sworn to serve Tyr to the best of his abilities. Now Tyr had given him the chance to save Phlan. "I'll do my best, Patriarch Anton," he managed to say.

Tarl grinned proudly at his son, while Listle laughed.

"Hammerseeker, eh?" the elf remarked. "Not bad, Kern. Not bad at all. For an ogre-brained oaf, that is."

"Thanks, Listle," Kern replied wryly.

The temple's sole surviving paladin, a tall, handsome man with steel-blue eyes, approached. "Patriarch Anton, we bow to your wisdom," Rialad began in his sonorous voice. "However..."

Anton raised a shaggy eyebrow in curiosity. "However what, Rialad?" The Patriarch knew Rialad to be a skilled warrior whose loyalty to the temple was beyond reproach. Yet the paladin had an exaggerated opinion of himself and a penchant for questioning Anton's authority.

"The prophecy of Bane has spoken clearly. Someone must quest for the hammer."

"Not someone," Tarl interjected. "The only one—"

The square-chinned paladin interrupted. "Yes, I know, Brother Tarl," he said graciously. "However, I am this temple's last paladin of Tyr and the natural candidate to take up the quest. Rest assured, I will choose four of the temple's best warriors to accompany me as the prophecy instructs. No foes will dare stand before us." Rialad clenched a fist dramatically. "The hammer will be ours!"

Anton and Tarl both opened their mouths to protest, but Listle was faster than either of them.

"But you can't deny the prophecy!" The elf was positively seething. She had never cared for Sir Rialad's lofty, self-important demeanor. "Kern is destined to be the Hammerseeker."

Sir Rialad smiled indulgently at Kern. "Ah, yes," the paladin said, putting a fatherly arm around Kern's shoulders. "Kern is a brave lad. I have nothing but confidence that one day he will prove himself a paladin of great worth." He turned to address the others. "But surely the consummate paladin Miltiades could not have intended that a mere stripling quest for the hammer while the fate of Phlan hangs in the balance."

For some reason Sir Rialad's expression made the paladin-aspirant shudder, and Kern had to fight the urge to squirm out of the knight's grasp.

"But we dare not disregard Miltiades' prophecy!" Tarl said angrily.

"So you would send an inexperienced puppy into the face of peril?" Rialad retorted. The paladin spun on Kern. "You understand, don't you, aspirant? We must place the good of the temple above our own ambitions for greatness. That is the first lesson you must learn as a paladin. You see as well as I how foolish it would be for you to seek the hammer, do you not? I have a strength and experience you could never hope to match."

Kern shook his head dizzily. Sir Rialad's words made sense. He didn't like being called a puppy, but he knew that he was young and sadly inexperienced. He opened his mouth to reply as the paladin watched expectantly.

"Kern, don't!" Listle hissed in his ear.

He ignored the elf. The word yes formed itself on Kern's tongue.

He never had the chance to utter it.

The enchanted stones of the temple's portico thundered a warning chant. "Beware! Foes approach! Stand ready, clerics of Tyr! Beware!"

Kern and Listle exchanged a look of surprise. Instantly the clerics around them jumped into action.

"Seal the gates!" Anton bellowed.

Four clerics shut and barred the main gates. Never in the

temple's history had the gates been breached, for underneath the ornately carved wood were thick plates of forge-hardened steel. The clerics of Tyr themselves were every bit as hardened beneath their kind and courteous manners. Ever battle-ready, they wore chain mail concealed beneath their gray robes.

Kern dashed up the steps leading to the battlements above the gates, Listle hot on his heels. Already clerics were readying piles of heavy stones and lighting fires under waiting caldrons of pitch. Kern gazed down the street that led up to the temple's gates.

"Something tells me we'd better get ready for a fight," Listle noted as a horde of men clad in ebony armor marched toward the temple, snaking through the street like a vast, dark serpent.

"You don't say," Kern said sarcastically.

"May Tyr grant us his protection!" Kern heard Anton shout below. The patriarch's voice was instantly echoed by a score of others. Suddenly, a shimmering blue nimbus sprang to life about the gates. The holy wards infused the portals, strengthening them with magical power.

Listle rummaged through the countless pouches hanging from her belt, readying the mystical components necessary for her spells, while Kern hefted his battlehammer. From his vantage on the wall he could survey all the preparations. Half the temple's clerics had mounted the wall, ready to drop stones and fiery pitch through the machicolations when the enemy arrived. The remainder had gathered in the courtyard below, poised to fight hand to hand should the enemy somehow manage to breach the walls. A few of the older clerics, Tarl among them, sequestered themselves inside the temple's main hall. There they wove spells of protection around the temple's entrance, preparing a last stand in the event the clerics were forced to retreat into the temple itself.

A cleric, whom Kern recognized as Sister Briatha,

approached. Before he could say anything, she touched him on the forehead and whispered a brief prayer. Suddenly Kern felt a warm wave of strength flow through his limbs, and a flame of courage ignite in his heart. He barely had time to react before Briatha had moved on to the preoccupied Listle. The elf looked up in surprise as Briatha joined the other clerics along the wall.

"Why am I glowing blue?" she asked Kern in annoyance.

"It's a protection spell," he explained. "Be grateful. Tyr himself is watching over us this day."

"Really? Well, I can take care of myself," Listle replied haughtily. "Besides, blue isn't my color."

She drew out a pinch of powder from a small bag and sprinkled it over her head. Immediately, a silvery luminescence swirled about the elven mage. "There!" she said in satisfaction. "That's more like it."

Suddenly there was no more time for preparations. The attacking army was storming the walls.

"Loose the rocks!" Anton shouted as he sensed the first emanations of dark magic probing the holy enchantments that strengthened the gates.

Kern and the others atop the wall dropped a volley of rocks onto the throng of armored attackers below. Many raised their shields to deflect the heavy stones, but not all were swift enough. A score of enemy warriors fell to the ground, their black armor crushed, never to rise again.

An imposing figure stepped to the fore of the enemy horde. He was a huge man, and, though clad in the same smooth black armor as the others, he was the obvious leader. The heavy stones the clerics dropped had no effect on him. They flashed crimson as they struck him and exploded into harmless dust.

"Hear me, weaklings of Tyr!" the leader boomed in a deafening voice. "I am called Slayer, and I bring doom. Save yourselves an agonizing demise. Deliver unto me the tome called The Oracle of Strife, and I promise that your deaths

will be swift."

"I guess they want the Hammer of Tyr, too!" Listle whispered. Kern shook his head. "More likely the riches that are buried with it."

Slayer placed his gauntleted hands on his hips in an arrogant pose. "What is your answer, clerics of Tyr?"

"This is our answer!" shouted one of the clerics, the stone-faced Brother Edmorel. At his command a torch was thrust into a caldron of pitch, and a sheet of fire poured down on the attackers. Screams of agony rose up as a dozen warriors roasted alive inside their armor, but the burning pitch dripped off Slayer as if it were mere water.

"So be it," the huge man proclaimed. He raised a gauntleted hand, and a sizzling bolt of sickly green color streaked directly toward Brother Edmorel, striking the cleric with terrible force. His cry of agony was cut short as he began to dissolve into green ooze. In a moment there was nothing left of the cleric but a dark stain on the stone where he had stood his ground. Both Kern and Listle stared in mute horror. Slayer muttered a dread incantation. Inky black energy swirled around him, solidifying into a huge battering ram crowned with an ogre's head. A dozen of the ebony-armored men propelled the ram toward the gates. The soft wood veneer cracked, splinters flying in every direction. The hard steel beneath shuddered but stood strong.

Again and again the battering ram pounded the gates, but the spells of protection held. The blue nimbus did not even waver. With an angry jerk of his hand, the man called Slayer banished the battering ram back to the shadows from which it had been conjured.

"There's something strange about him," Listle muttered. "I have an idea." Before Kern could stop her, she stood to hurl a tiny sphere of silver magic at the man.

Her aim was true. The glowing sphere shattered against Slayer's breastplate with a sound like breaking glass. He took a step backward in surprise, then grinned evilly,

apparently unharmed.

Kern groaned. "That spell certainly didn't work, Listle."

"Is that so?" she asked archly.

Kern stared in wonder as tendrils of silver magic coiled around Slayer's form. Suddenly the huge man's visage began to warp and crack. His skin seemed to melt into a foul puddle at his feet, revealing dark scales. Slowly, black wings unfurled from Slayer's back; recurved talons sprang from his fingertips. A cry of fury came from a maw filled with teeth as sharp as knives. Listle's magic had dispelled the illusion that had been Slayer's disguise.

"It is a fiend!" Kern heard someone shout. "An abishai!"

A wave of alarm swept through the clerics. This was no mundane enemy. Only powerful wizards could summon and control such creatures. The followers of Tyr gripped their warhammers more tightly. This was not going to be an easy battle.

The abishai, Slayer, bellowed to the sky. Suddenly nine dark shapes swooped down from above.

The clerics atop the battlements swarmed for cover as the fiends dove overhead. The spinagons alighted on the street, each plunging two clawed fists into the wall. Their arms disappeared up to their shoulders as if they were thrusting into mud instead of solid rock. Then, their wings beating with effort, the fiends began to pull. There was a hideous sucking sound as the stones began to distort and bend. Gradually, with their massively muscled arms, the spinagons pushed the magically softened stones to either side until each had created a hole in the wall. As the holes became larger, the fiends crawled inside, using their wings to spread the stones farther and farther apart. In moments, each of the fiends had become a living archway supporting a man-sized opening in the wall.

The unthinkable had happened. The walls had been breached.

"Guard the gaps!" came Anton's bellow from below. Quickly,

Listle, Kern, and the clerics scrambled down the stone stairs to the courtyard. There they helped the others confront the ebony warriors now streaming through the nine holes held open by the spinagons.

Luckily, the enemy could only come through the holes one at a time. Though clad in forbidding armor and wielding swords of dark steel, there was something clumsy about the attackers. They did not move with the strength and ease of warriors. Rather, their attacks were furtive and sloppy, and they held their swords awkwardly.

However, when one died beneath the crushing blow of a cleric's hammer, another was already slipping through the hole. More and more began to dodge past the clerics guarding the gaps. Soon the courtyard was awash in a sea of battle. Kern found himself swinging his hammer for his life, denting dark helms and breastplates with each blow. This was his first real battle, and he found his blood surging with a strange mixture of terror and exuberance, his training singing in his veins. Maybe he wasn't a true paladin like Sir Rialad, but he was holding his own.

Still more black-armored men poured through the spinagons' holes. Anton and the other clerics began chanting a war song. In truth, the hymn was more than a simple prayer to steel the hearts of the defenders. It also provided an unusual method of synchronizing attacks.

When the clerics came to a key phrase in the chant, all of them swung their weapons twice as hard and twice as fast. The effect was stunning. The enemy was taken completely off guard by the coordinated counterattack. Those that did not immediately crumple to the ground were driven back, and the clerics started the chant anew.

Then the fiend Slayer stepped through one of the gaps.

Listle, the first to respond, conjured a huge silvery wyvern. The magical beast spread its batlike wings and swooped at Slayer, claws outstretched, its cry piercing the air. The onyx warriors cringed in terror, but their fiendish leader simply

batted the wyvern aside with a casual flick of its wrist. The beast was torn into ethereal tatters. The illusion had not fooled Slayer.

A band of hammer-wielding clerics tried to battle their way toward the huge abishai fiend, but they were repulsed by a phalanx of ebony swordsmen. The creature spread its sable wings. Harsh words of magic tumbled from its forked tongue. For a heartbeat Slayer's warriors were wreathed by a faint crimson light. Then each of them plunged into the melee with renewed ferocity. The clerics of Tyr defended valiantly, but they were outnumbered and tiring. Inch by inch, the dark warriors began to push the disciples of Tyr back toward the temple.

With an ominous sucking sound, the spinagons detached themselves from the wall. Now that the gaps were no longer needed, they were free to join the battle. Slayer hissed foully to two of the fiends, and the pair began threading their way through the melee—directly toward Kern.

"They intend to capture the Hammerseeker!" Kern heard someone cry.

The fiends brought out a net lined with heavy lead weights, and Kern tried to lunge out of the way, hoping he would be able to move fast enough to escape entanglement.

Then the fiends stopped abruptly, staring in confusion. So did the young warrior. Suddenly there were a half-dozen Kerns standing in the courtyard, each identical to the other, all looking equally dumbfounded. The fiends hesitated, not certain which was the real Hammerseeker. When they finally cast the net over one, the image vanished in a puff of smoke.

Kern didn't waste the second chance.

"Scatter!" he shouted to his mirror images. He dashed through the throng as five replicates of him did likewise. Luckily, the fiends chased after one of the fakes. Kern breathed a sigh of relief, casting a look of gratitude in Listle's direction. The elven mage was deep in

concentration, preparing another spell.

"Fall back!" Anton's baritone boomed out over the courtyard.

"To the temple!"

Fending off blows as he went, Kern retreated up the steps of the temple and into the columned portico. Sir Rialad was the last one inside the protective aura Tarl and several other clerics had cast to guard the entrance. A score of ebony-clad warriors dashed toward the temple, but when they reached the steps, they were instantly immolated by crackling fire. In moments, nothing was left of them but charred husks.

Slayer hurled a ball of jet-black magic against the aura. The dark magic was dissipated harmlessly, but the blue glow dimmed alarmingly for a moment. When it shone forth again, it was not as bright as before.

"I'm afraid the protections won't hold for long," Tarl said grimly. "That fiend must be a powerful sorcerer."

"Then we'll have to rely on our hammers," Sir Rialad said bravely. "We cannot let it capture The Oracle of Strife."

Another dusky sphere struck the shimmering ward that guarded the entrance. The aura wavered, then disintegrated in a shower of azure sparks. With cries of blood-lust, the armored warriors surged up the temple's steps, their black swords clashing in a deadly cacophony with the hammers of the clerics of Tyr.

Kern saw the abishai, Slayer, wade through the fray. As it drew closer to the temple the fiend brought out a golden ring and slipped it over a clawed finger. Suddenly the abishai blinked out of sight. Kern drew in a hissing breath. How could they fight an enemy they couldn't see?

The nine spinagons joined the fray, and the battle took a dire turn. The clerics of the temple were fighters of courage and skill, but the otherworldly fiends had tipped the odds.

Kern watched in horror as Sister Briatha, the cleric who had blessed him before the battle, died screaming, impaled on the recurved talons of one of the spinagons. The monster shook off the woman's limp form, advancing on Kern, who

barely fended off its cruel swipes with the whistling arc of his hammer. The clerics around him were in similar predicaments. Either the warriors or fiends alone they might have been able to handle, but both ... Kern didn't allow himself to finish the gloomy thought. He gritted his teeth, sweat pouring from his brow, as he swung his hammer again and again.

"I think it's time to do something about those fiends," Listle said to nobody in particular. She called the words of a spell to mind, then murmured an arcane incantation. Suddenly a tiny, brilliant point of light appeared in her hand. She lifted her palm, and the sparkle of magical light fluttered through the air like a bumblebee toward its target. It was such an innocuous sight that the spinagon did not even notice it until the light buzzed around the fiend's head and flew inside its pointed ear.

Suddenly, the spinagon's eyes went wide. It let out a terrible, gurgling scream, and lashed out with its claws, striking at some unseen enemy.

Listle allowed herself a smile of satisfaction at the deadly spell she had cast. Though the battle was entirely in the fiend's imagination, the consequences would be very real and quite fatal.

In its frenzy, the fiend did not see the ebony warriors—its own allies—who died screaming under its clawed feet. Soon another of the fiends began to shriek in terror, lashing out wildly with its talons. The others soon followed suit. In seconds, all nine spinagons were whirling about the courtyard, slicing onyx-armored warriors to ribbons with their blind flailings.

Listle stared in surprise. She hadn't expected her spell to affect all of them! She was no expert on the art of summoning—illusion was her preferred school of magic—but she remembered that a group of fiends called into the world through a single spell were inextricably linked. She hadn't realized how deep that nexus ran. Not that she felt like

complaining.

The fiends turned on each other, and in less than a minute all of them were dead. They'd torn each other to pieces trying to combat foes that didn't really exist.

"And some people think illusionists aren't worth anything in battle," Listle said with a sniff.

The remaining black-armored warriors were quickly dispatched by the clerics. Disheartened by the grisly spectacle of the dying fiends and by the apparent desertion of their leader, Slayer, the last warriors did not put up much of a fight.

But the threat was not over.

"A foe in the temple!" came a shout from within. Recognizing the voice as Tarl's, Kern and Listle rushed into the temple behind Anton and Rialad. Inside, they found the blind cleric guarding the table that held the magically warded Oracle of Strife and swinging his hammer at a foe only he could see. Two clerics lay dead before him, victims of the invisible enemy.

"Show yourself, coward!" Tarl growled. "Your enchantments won't hide you from me."

Suddenly a shadow form materialized before the white-haired cleric. It was the huge abishai, Slayer.

"Out of my way, weakling cleric of Tyr," the fiend snarled. "The Oracle is mine."

"On my honor, you are wrong on that count," Sir Rialad cried, leaping forward. With a snarl, Slayer conjured a crimson ball of flame, hurling it at the brave paladin. It burst against Rialad's breastplate, covering him with searing fire. Howling as his flesh began to singe and wither, Sir Rialad sank to his knees.

Kern moved to counterattack, but a fierce look from Slayer stopped him in his tracks.

"One step closer, and this fool cleric is the next to go up in flames." The fiend was pointing a gleaming talon at Tarl. The white-haired cleric abruptly froze, unable to move, magically

bound by chains no one could see.

Kern halted, unsure what to do.

"The Oracle is mine," Slayer hissed, reaching out for the tome.

"By Tyr, you will not have it!" a hoarse voice croaked.

Sir Rialad, his flesh dark and cracked, lurched forward and fell onto the table, clutching The Oracle of Strife to his still-burning chest. Crimson fire licked at the ancient parchment, then flared, consuming book and paladin together in a gout of flame.

Slayer screamed in outrage and spun around, only to be blocked by Kern's hammer. The paladin-aspirant stood protectively in front of his father.

"You've lost, fiend," Kern growled, amazed at the steel he heard in his own voice.

"You don't know who you're dealing with, cub!" the fiend shrieked, beating its leathery wings.

"I don't care who—or what—you are!" Kern shouted. For a moment he forgot that he was only a paladin-aspirant. With a fierce battle cry, he swung his hammer in a bone-crushing arc.

The fiend reached out and grabbed the weapon, jerking Kern's arms to a halt. The young man tried to yank the hammer free, but all his strength was nothing against the monster.

"You think you have won, but you are mistaken, Hammerseeker," the fiend hissed. "You have gained a little time, that is all. One day soon, my mistress will own you. Of that you can be certain."

Slayer's hand glowed a blistering red. The head of Kern's battlehammer shone white-hot in the fiend's grip, then melted. Molten fire splashed against Kern's gauntlets as he quickly dropped the hammer's haft.

The monstrous abishai spoke a guttural word of magic. There was a clap of thunder, and the fiend vanished in a cloud of thick, foul-smelling smoke. Gradually the acrid haze

dissipated. The monster called Slayer was gone.

"I don't know, Kern," Listle said wryly, "but something tells me you didn't make any friends today."

4

Perilous Summonings

"Why, by all the bloodiest gods, must I always endure such fools around me?"

A bolt of magic streaked from Sirana's fingertips. It ricocheted wildly around her circular spellcasting chamber, deep in the subterranean warrens of the thieves' guild, pulverizing priceless sculptures and blasting antique furniture to ashes before finally dissipating against the porphyry walls.

"How could they lose?" Sirana shrieked, her hands clenched into fists. But no human being could answer her. The last three thieves who had entered her chamber were now scuttling around the floor in the form of cockroaches, doing their best to avoid being crushed by her boot heels. "How could they have lost to a band of doddering holy men? All that blasted abishai had to do was bring back an old book and a foolish boy!"

Sirana caught a glimpse of her reflection in a mirror of polished bronze. She liked what she saw—a tall, shapely woman with dark hair and smoldering eyes, clad in a thin white shift belted by a heavy braid of gold. Yes, she thought, even in her rage she looked supremely beautiful. She enjoyed this human form she had taken. Not a hint of her fiendish heritage showed beneath the sultry, feminine exterior.

She sank into an ornately carved chair—one of the few items in the room that had escaped her magical wrath— and bit delicately on a knuckle. It was time to put rage aside and calculate a new course of action. Revenge was best planned with a cool head. Sirana knew that well. After all, she had made revenge her specialty.

It was obvious that a direct attack on the clerics of Tyr would

not avail her. She had spent months taking over Phlan's thieves' guild, perverting it to suit her purposes. Then she had summoned Slayer to be her servant. Slayer was a baatezu abishai, a magical creature of fearsome power, but he had failed miserably. No matter the armored horde of thieves and the pack of feral spinagons she had sent to help him.

She picked up a small black-lacquered box from a table beside the chair. It was her most precious possession, a gift from her beloved mother on the day Sirana had murdered the old crone. It was a box full of magical memories. Carefully, Sirana opened the lid. Gradually an image began to form in the darkness within.

An image of a lofty tower, hewn of crimson stone.

Though Sirana had never gazed upon the tower with her own eyes, it was nonetheless a familiar sight to her. The tower had belonged to her father, Lord Marcus, a powerful Red Wizard from the eastern land of Thay. Once it had been a citadel of awesome power built above a legendary pool of darkness. Marcus had managed to imprison the entire city of Phlan in a cavern underneath the tower, intending to drain the life-forces of the citizens in order to transform himself into a demigod.

"But it was all for nothing," Sirana whispered mournfully. "If only I could have been there to help."

She watched as history replayed in the images of the black box. She saw the defilers come to the tower: a ranger, a sorceress, a barbarian who could assume the form of a great cat, and finally the one who always sent a shiver of fear through her—a skeletal paladin, his empty eye sockets glowing with horrible, holy blue light. The undead paladin had been the cause of her father's demise, and for that she despised him most of all. The paladin had turned to dust at the end of the battle, so he was beyond the reach of revenge. But the others were not.

She watched as the tiny tower inside the black box began to

topple and fall. She watched as the invaders fled the scene of destruction. For long moments, the images were still. Nothing moved. Then Sirana could glimpse her mother, the beautiful, fiendish erinyes who had served the human, Lord Marcus, crawl from the ruins, bleeding, wings twisted and broken, yet alive.

The erinyes had given birth to Sirana not long after the defeat at the red tower. Because of her half-fiendish blood, Sirana had grown quickly. Early on, her mother had sown the seeds of enmity in Sirana's heart, teaching her everything about the powers of darkness that might be useful one day to hunt those who had killed Marcus and injured the erinyes. When Sirana was nine, she had tested her daughter's progress in a magical duel. In the course of the battle, Sirana had slain her mother, gaining the erinyes's power for her own. Neither regretted the outcome of the duel. Even as she lay dying, the erinyes had presented the memory box to Sirana and made her take a vow of vengeance.

For years, Sirana had bided her time, waiting for the perfect moment to enact her revenge. And then a wondrous opportunity had presented itself. She discovered a fantastic new source of power that made her stronger than she had ever dared to hope. A plan unfurled in her mind. Not only would she kill those who had slain her father, she would also regain the precious Hammer of Tyr the city held so dear. Without the hammer, Phlan would never be healed of the vice and corruption that had come to plague it since the hammer was lost. Then she would ransom the hammer to one of the many dark gods who despised Tyr. In exchange for the relic, she would demand to become a demigod, just as Marcus himself, her father, had once dreamed. Her vengeance, and her destiny, would be complete.

The iron door of her spellcasting chamber flew open with a boom, shattering her pleasant reverie. She scowled, snapping shut the memory box. A cruel light shone in her dark eyes. Yes, she would have her revenge, and she would

become a deity. This minor setback at the temple meant nothing at all. But first she had some tedious business to take care of.

"We have dealt the imbecile clerics of Tyr a blow they will not soon forget, Sirana!" a voice thundered.

Slayer. The abishai strutted into her chamber, displaying dagger-sharp fangs. Several roaches scuttled about in terror. Unlike Slayer, they possessed an inkling of what was going to happen.

The massive fiend stood before Sirana's chair, breath reeking, the veins in its membranous wings pulsing with black blood.

"It was a glorious battle," Slayer snarled arrogantly. "The morons of Tyr will never stand another assault."

"Is that so?" Sirana crooned. "And what do we have left to assault them with, Slayer? An army of cockroaches?" She flung a small crimson ball of energy at one of the insects crawling by. When the smoke cleared, all that remained was a scorched spot on the stone floor.

Slayer shrugged massive shoulders. "They couldn't prove any worse in battle than your spinagons, mistress. Not that your army of thieves was much better. Despite their ineptitude, I almost got my hands on The Oracle of Strife. Then a blasted paladin I had set ablaze had the gall to collapse on the book. It was ashes before I could blink. Your idiot spinagons should have stopped him, but they had all perished at the hands of an elven illusionist." The fiend's scarlet eyes glowed hotly. "You didn't tell me there would be a mage in the temple, mistress. Tch, tch! You should be grateful I am still alive to serve you."

A smile coiled itself about Sirana's lips like a small ruby serpent. "Indeed, abishai, I am exceedingly grateful. And I feel I should grant you a reward for your accomplishments."

She lifted a hand. Slayer's eyes flared suspiciously. Black flames encircled the fiend's body. Layer after layer of magical protections wove themselves about the abishai. The

fiend glared at its mistress smugly. It had nothing to fear from the half-breed daughter of a lowly erinyes.

"You dare to raise a hand against me?" Slayer snarled. Drool flew from the abishai's maw, pitting the stone floor where it splattered. "I am a prince among fiends. Your mother's kind are insects to me, and your father's most powerful spells could not so much have scratched my defenses. You summoned me into this world, Sirana, but do not for a moment believe that you will be able to hurt me."

Sirana feigned an impressed look. "I have misjudged you, great abishai," she simpered. She fell to her knees before the fiend's clawed feet, bowing her head submissively. "Truly I am not worthy of being called mistress by one so mighty as yourself."

Slayer let out a deep, rumbling laugh. "Well, this is more appropriate, erinyes-spawn."

Abruptly Sirana stood up, a vicious smile on her beautiful face. Slayer stared at her, too late noticing the rune she had drawn upon the floor while she knelt.

The rune spewed forth a white-hot funnel of sparks.

"What is this?" the abishai hissed as the sparks covered its body. The fiend tried to bat them away, but the sparks seared its scaly flesh with pain wherever they touched. Black flames flared to protect Slayer, but the sparks sent by Sirana spun faster and faster. The abishai's aura of protection shattered.

"No!" Slayer screamed. "This cannot be!"

Sirana watched as the sparks adhered to Slayer's skin. They covered the fiend, consumed it.

"But I am a prince of fiends!"

The abishai writhed like a skewered lizard, its entire form burning with magic, its body lost in the maelstrom of sparks. The tornadolike magic whirled faster and faster. Then Slayer began to shrink, melting into the rune on the floor. One last wail of fury echoed around the chamber, then the tornado was sucked down into the rune that had spawned it.

The magical symbol shimmered with power. Sirana did not hesitate. She knelt down, pressing her forehead against the rune.

Searing heat shot through her skull, but before she could scream it faded to a dull, almost pleasant tingling. Sirana stood, new power surging through her veins. The rune on the floor had vanished, but a mirror image of the symbol glowed momentarily on her pale forehead. Then it, too, faded. All the power that had been Slayer's was now hers to command.

She stretched luxuriously, then sank onto a velvet covered chaise, reveling in her victory over the abishai. A month ago such a conquest would have been beyond her abilities. But not now. Every day she grew stronger. Her destiny beckoned. True, The Oracle of Strife had been destroyed, but the riddle of the hammer's hiding place had apparently been solved, or the clerics of Tyr would never have allowed the book to go up in flames. Sirana would find other ways of obtaining her prize. It would be simple enough to find the hammer by following those sent to fetch it, and Sirana's otherworldly spies had already informed her that the son of two of her father's killers would be among them.

She tossed her head back and laughed, a high, trilling sound that echoed off the cold stone walls. She was a highly creative fiend, after all. She was certain she would think of something.

Raising her hand, she gently stroked a braided ring fashioned from the coarse hair of some monster. "Hoag, I summon you. Come to me."

Instantly, a creature materialized high above her. The hamatula, a baatezu of the Nine Hells, was a tall, long-limbed fiend covered from head to claw with cruelly barbed spikes. The hamatula were cousins of the abishai and erinyes, but after her experience with Slayer, Sirana found that she preferred the cruel and crafty hamatula to the brutish and arrogant abishai. Hoag had served her well in

the past. She should have thought to summon this particular fiend earlier.

"Sirana," the fiend growled with pleasure. "How wonderful it is to be summoned by a wizard of your eminence once again."

It bowed low, its long, spindly limbs strangely graceful. Its exquisitely sharp talons brushed the stone floor, tracing fine lines in the hard stone. "What task may I perform for you, mistress?"

"I need you to help me with a little plot I've concocted, Hoag," Sirana said liltingly. She ran a finger lightly along one of the hamatula's razor-edged barbs. "Of course, I can't have you walking around the city of Phlan looking like this."

The sorceress waved her hand. Shadows drifted down to swirl about the hamatula. When the shadows dispersed, the spider-limbed fiend was gone, and in its place stood a tall knight of noble bearing clad in ornate armor of midnight black. He bore a sable shield without device or crest. His face was concealed behind the visor of his helm.

"That's better." Sirana, deep in thought, chewed her lower lip delicately. "Of course, a good knight needs a proper steed." She waved her hand again. This time the shadows coalesced to form a glossy, jet-black charger. Its scarlet nostrils flared as it snorted, tossing its shadowy mane.

"Now, listen carefully at what you are to do, Hoag."

The tall knight nodded his head. "It is with the greatest pleasure that I serve, my dark lady."

* * * * *

Sirana was resting in her chamber after sending Hoag off on his errand, lost in daydreams of power and vengeance and on the verge of drifting into an exquisite slumber.

Suddenly, she felt hostile energy attack the intricate tapestry of warding enchantments she had woven around her spellcasting chamber. Her smoldering eyes flew open, and she leaped to her feet.

I will not be ignored!

The voice seemed to roar in her mind, ancient and powerful. It came to her across a vast distance, but Sirana reeled beneath its thunderous force all the same.

Release me, wizard!

She could feel the enchantments that cocooned her chamber waver. Fear clutched at her heart, and she cursed herself inwardly. She should have been expecting some onslaught.

Release me now!

A terrible blast of pure energy shredded the last of the chamber's defenses, knocking Sirana to her knees. Fighting panic, she did her best to absorb the virulent forces. To her amazement, she found the will to resist.

She staggered to her feet. This morning such an attack would have burnt her to cinders. She must have usurped more power from Slayer than she had imagined. Her far-off foe would not get another chance to strike. Closing her eyes, she launched a barrage of her own against her unseen assailant. She was rewarded by a howl of pain that she heard mentally. That would buy her a little time.

With a single word of magic, Sirana propelled her spirit from her body. She had learned to travel astrally from her mother, and nowadays did it as if it were second nature. She seemed to rise up through the ceiling, then high into the sky above, all the while trailing a twisted silver thread that kept her spirit in contact with the corporeal form that remained behind in her subterranean chamber.

The land rushed by in a blur beneath her. In moments, she approached a line of high, knife-edged peaks: the Dragonspine Mountains. She plunged down into a chasm of darkness. In less than an eyeblink, her spirit journey ended.

Sirana snapped her astral fingers. Light flared into existence all around her, revealing a huge cavern. She stood at the edge of what appeared to be an underground lake. Its surface was a dull, steely color, its waters strangely thick and turgid. But then, this was no ordinary pool. It was a pool

of twilight, a source of powerful and forbidding magic.
"Why have you dared to attack me?" Sirana demanded.
Something stirred beneath the leaden waters of the pool.
The guardian.

You promised that you would free me if I granted you power!
A wheedling note had entered into the guardian's voice. I
have kept my end of the bargain, wizard. Now your turn has
come. Release me!

Sirana considered her reply carefully. She didn't have the
slightest idea what the true nature was of the creature
trapped within the pool, but she did know that it was
treacherous and deadly. It had nearly slain her the day she
had finally located the pool after years of searching. Yet
Sirana was nothing if not cunning. She had adopted a
sympathetic tone with the guardian of the pool, that day
months ago. Lonely after centuries of isolation, the guardian
had listened to her soothing promises. She had struck a
bargain with the creature. If the guardian infused her with
magical energy from the pool, making her the most powerful
wizard in Faerun, she would endeavor to free it from its
watery prison.

Of course, Sirana had absolutely no intention of fulfilling her
side of the bargain. The only way to free the guardian, she
had learned, would be to trade places with it, and she was
hardly going to condemn herself to such a fate once she had
gained the hammer. No, she was destined to become a
goddess! But the guardian need not know that. It must
believe that she intended to liberate it. Otherwise, the
guardian would never consent to help her carry out her
grandiose ambitions.

"Of course we have an agreement," Sirana said finally,
choosing her words carefully. "I have not forgotten that,
even if you have."

But I have given you the power you asked for! The waters of
the pool stirred sluggishly again. Bubbles rose to the
surface, breaking slowly, like pox blisters on the skin of a

victim.

"It is not enough!" Sirana clenched a fist, baring her white teeth. "You must give me strength enough to defeat my enemies. That is our pact."

But you are battling foes greater than you can imagine, the guardian protested. Throughout the centuries, I have sent my own minions to wipe that wretched city of Phlan off the face of Toril, and each time my hordes have been defeated! Always the people of Phlan seem to find some blasted hero to come to their rescue. Always! You cannot let them find the Hammer of Tyr. If the hammer returns to Phlan, the city will be protected for all time, and neither of us will have our glorious revenge!

"Leave Phlan and the hammer to me," Sirana snapped. "That is none of your concern. Now grant me more of the pool's power, or—"

Or what?

"Or suffer the consequences."

Chanting a harsh incantation, Sirana pointed a finger at the stalactite-covered ceiling high above. Abruptly, one of the massive limestone stalactites broke free. Glowing red-hot, it plunged into the pool. The dusky waters closed around it without so much as a splash or sizzle. But a cry of pain rose into the air of the cavern.

She continued her chant. Another molten stalactite plunged into the pool, then another, and another. Each of them sank below the surface without a sound, but Sirana knew they were striking the unknown creature concealed below, burning into its flesh.

No more, wizard! Please, stop!

Sirana chanted on. A veritable rain of searing stalactites cascaded down on the pool.

I beg you, wizard! Please! You shall have what you seek!

This last was little more than a guttural whisper. Sirana halted her chanting. The molten rain of stone ended.

"That's better," she murmured condescendingly.

A small glass vial rose up out of the pool, separating itself from the thick fluid with a sucking sound.

Drink of this, wizard, and you shall have the power you seek. Sirana closed her astral fingers around the vial. "I knew you would come to your senses, guardian," she said. With a flick of her wrist she transported the vial back to her spellcasting chamber. "I trust you will not try anything so foolish again. I will free you when I have gained my revenge, and not a moment before. Is that clear?"

Exceedingly clear, wizard.

Sirana smiled, an expression of sublime evil. "Good. I'm so glad we understand each other." Without another word she dispatched her astral body. It soared up out of the chamber and back toward Phlan.

If Sirana had stayed just a moment more, she might have noticed several bubbles rising to the dull surface of the pool, breaking with a thick, wet noise that sounded uncannily like laughter.

* * * * *

Once more Sirana reclined on the black velvet lounge in her private chamber. It was verging on midnight, and she was weary. Astral travel was terribly draining, and the confrontation with the guardian of the pool had consumed most of her considerable reserves of strength. But she could not rest, not if she was going to find that damnable Hammer of Tyr.

She gazed at the vial in her hand. Faint sparkles of light seemed to drift through the thick, metallic-looking fluid within. She briefly considered summoning Hoag. The guardian of the pool could have given her the vial as a trick; it might be poisonous. To find out, she could command the hamatula to taste it. But she didn't want to take the risk of giving the fiend greater power. "Let's be done with it," she said finally.

She lifted the vial to her lips and drank down the oddly warm, steely tasting liquid.

Fire coursed through her veins.

Choking in pain, Sirana fell from the lounge. Her perfect alabaster flesh darkened in hue, becoming a rich bronze color. Two flecks of silvery light ignited in her dark eyes. Writhing on the floor, she swore. What a dolt! She should have suspected a trick. She should have readied a spell of transference so that she could escape this now-doomed body to possess another.

"I cannot die like this!" she croaked, her face twisted in agony. "Not yet!"

Suddenly, the pain vanished.

It was as if she had been plunged into a vat of cool, dark water. Slowly, Sirana pulled herself to her feet, gasping. The darkened chamber seemed to have been transformed. Where before there had been mere shadows, now there was layer upon layer of scintillating darkness. She spun about. Everywhere she looked she saw shades of jet, onyx, and ebony. It was breathtakingly beautiful.

A realization struck her. It was not the room that had changed, but her eyes! Darkness was no longer a barrier to her vision. Now she could see and touch the very fabric of night. This was a gift indeed. She reached out and stroked the silken darkness, gathering it about her like a cloak.

"What is this?" she murmured.

She touched a strange, glistening thread of darkness hovering before her. It was a thread of summoning, she realized. She had used such magical tendrils to call fiends to her many times before, but those threads had always been silvery, shimmering with life energy. This thread was wonderfully black. What type of creature could it possibly belong to? She tugged at the thread, willing whatever existed on the other end to hasten to her side.

"Who dares?" a thin, dusty voice whispered.

"I command you to appear," Sirana ordered. She stepped into the protective center of her summoning symbol and pulled harder on the black thread.

"You do not sleep," the dusty voice rasped with strange surprise. "You do not dream."

"No, I command." Gathering her will, Sirana gave one final tug on the thread. Suddenly, it evaporated in her fingers, and the creature arrived.

It floated before her, a thing of shadow the size of a man. It seemed featureless except for its long, twiglike fingers and a mouth full of moon-white teeth.

For a moment a feeling of alarm surged in Sirana's chest. She had never seen a being quite like this before. Would she be able to control its terrible evil? With her mental powers, she gently probed its aura. Immediately she relaxed. She could sense that this shadow creature was bound to her by her summoning. It must obey.

"What are you?" she demanded.

"I am Sigh," the creature breathed in its indistinct voice.

"I am a bastellus. The world in which my kind dwells is far from this one. But there are some of your race there. They know us as dreamstalkers." Tendrils of shadow floated about the bastellus like ethereal tentacles. "How is it that you summoned me?"

"I ask the questions here," Sirana proclaimed imperiously. Dutifully, the creature fell silent.

Sirana was well pleased. It seemed the guardian of the pool of twilight had kept its part of the bargain. She had never seen a creature of such perfect blackness. It was beautiful. And it was all hers.

"Shall I enter the dreams of your foes and feed upon them, mistress?" the bastellus hissed.

"That is within your powers?"

The bastellus nodded.

Sirana smiled in cruel satisfaction, tapping a thoughtful finger against her smooth jaw. "Very well, Sigh."

She laughed then, a rich, evil sound, the flecks of twilight-colored light flickering in her dancing eyes.

Distant Friends

"Thieves?" Tarl asked in shock. "But how can you be sure?"

"It was the way they handled themselves in battle that gave me the first clue," Anton replied. The big, shaggy cleric of Tyr sat in a heavy oak chair in the main chamber of Denlor's Tower. Shal was bandaging a ragged gash on Anton's shoulder in her typically efficient manner. Kern and Listle sat at a nearby table, picking at some food Shal had set out for them. Neither was particularly hungry. Once the excitement of the battle had faded, Kern found the feeling replaced by exhaustion and not just a little trepidation, for the fiends had made it clear they were after him.

"Those warriors were used to moving about unencumbered," Anton went on. "And they were obviously accustomed to using smaller and shorter weapons. They kept trying to attack at close quarters even though they didn't have adequate room to swing a long sword. All that points to their being members of the thieves' guild. But what clinched it were the notched ears."

"Notched ears?" Tarl asked with a frown.

"That's right. The last guildmaster, Bercan, lost his left ear in a duel some years ago. Ever since, the thieves of Phlan have notched their left ears as a sign of loyalty." Anton grimaced in pain as Shal deftly but firmly tightened the bandage around his shoulder. "By all the gods of light, woman, can't you be a little gentler? I'm hurt enough as it is."

"Something tells me you'll live, Anton," Shal said dryly. He gave her a glowering look, which she returned with a laugh. She gathered her salves and bandages, and turned her attention to Kern. Fortunately, none of his wounds were as deep as the gouge in Anton's shoulder.

Listle spoke up. It was virtually impossible to keep the elf out of a conversation for very long anyway. "What would the thieves of Phlan want with the Hammer of Tyr, Patriarch

Anton? Could they have ransomed it back to the temple for gold?"

"Perhaps," Anton replied with a shrug. "Or more likely they were interested in the riches that are said to be hidden with the hammer."

Tarl struck fist against palm. The blind cleric paced before the hearth in agitation. "There's still something about this that bothers me. The thieves' guild has never attacked the temple before, let alone in broad daylight. And posing as warriors is very unusual. What could have made them do it? There's something else to this mystery."

"Fiends." Shal looked up from her work, a grim light in her emerald eyes. "Since when have thieves been able to summon fiends from the Nine Hells?"

Anton stood. "Since never," he growled.

"Then it might be interesting to know who summoned them," Shal mused. "If we answer that question, I think we'll find out who it is that so desperately wants the hammer. And the Hammerseeker." She frowned disapprovingly at her son as the salve she had smeared across one of his cuts turned into a puff of sticky blue cobwebs. "I told you to concentrate on keeping your wall of resistance down, Kern," she said sternly. "The salves won't work if you can't control your unmagic for at least a few seconds."

"Sorry." Kern's expression was sheepish. "I don't know why, but it keeps getting harder."

Shal studied him for a long moment. "It's most likely the aftereffect of the battle," she decided. "The more danger you're in, the stronger your unmagic is likely to get." She set down the jar of magical salve, reaching for a cloth soaked in warm water laced with willow bark. "I'm afraid you're going to have to heal naturally this time."

"You'd better get used to battle, Kern," Anton warned the young man gravely. "I have little doubt that this was only the first in a wave of attacks. Someone wants the Hammer of Tyr very badly, and they're going to do whatever it takes to

get it. I imagine that even now our mysterious foe is enslaving more fiends from the nether worlds."

Listle sighed deeply. "The poor fiends."

Kern gaped at her. "'The poor fiends?'" he practically choked. "What on Toril are you talking about, Listle?"

"They didn't ask to be summoned and enslaved," the elven illusionist said indignantly.

"Listle, they're fiends," Kern retorted in disbelief. "They're evil."

"How do you know all of them are really evil?" Listle demanded, hands on her hips. "Maybe some of them have been ordered to attack us against their will." She fidgeted with the shimmering ruby pendant hanging at her throat.

Kern shook his head in amazement. What had gotten into the foolish elf? "Believe me, Listle, only an evil wizard would have summoned them. So they have to be evil."

"Is that so?" Listle said scathingly. Her silvery eyes were blazing. She spun around and flounced right through a wall of solid basalt. Kern could only gawk after her in bewilderment.

"What's the matter with her?" he asked in a wounded voice. Shal regarded her son seriously, then sighed. "You're very pigheaded, Kern."

"Kern didn't do anything wrong," Anton protested. "Listle was talking nonsense."

The red-haired sorceress rolled her eyes. "Men!" she exclaimed, as if that were explanation enough. Kern, Tarl, and Anton wore looks of confusion.

"Oh, quit gaping like that," Shal snapped. "There are some things men never seem to learn."

The looks of confusion grew even worse. Shal smacked a palm against her forehead. "Never mind!" she said in exasperation.

With a groan, Shal left the three men and went in search of her apprentice. She finally found the elf in an unlikely place—sweeping the floor in Shal's own spellcasting chamber. It

wasn't a task the elf generally volunteered to do. She must be upset, indeed, the sorceress thought.

After a long moment, Shal spoke gently. "Kern can be a bit stubborn, can't he?"

Listle looked up from her work in surprise. Then she nodded, sighing. "You can say that again."

Shal smiled fondly. "He's his father's son in that regard. But he didn't mean to upset you, Listle. You know that, don't you?"

The elf nodded. "I know, Shal. And I'm not mad at him, really." A faint, impish smile touched her lips. "Well, not much anyway."

Shal laughed at this. She took the broom from Listle's hands and sat the elf down in a chair. Then she brewed a pot of herbal tea over a small brazier and poured two cups full of the steaming, fragrant liquid.

Shal sat and regarded her apprentice thoughtfully for a moment. The truth was, Listle was almost as much a mystery to the sorceress as she was to Kern. The elf had shown up at the tower two years before, wanting to learn the craft of magic, and Shal did not have the heart to turn her down. Besides, Shal had sorely needed an apprentice to help out around the laboratory, and Listle had proved to be both a quick study and a hard worker, if a bit unpredictable at times.

Yet after two years, Shal knew little more of the elf than she had been told that first day. Listle's homeland was Evermeet, the land of the silver elves far across the western Sea of Swords, but she spoke of her past rarely. And Shal was not the type to pry.

Listle broke the silence. "Shal, tell me how Tarl first brought the Hammer of Tyr to Phlan. He had a difficult time, didn't he?"

The sorceress stared in surprise at Listle's unexpected question. Then she nodded. Sometimes the best way to forget your own troubles was to listen to someone else's. She

sipped her tea, thinking.

"It was more than thirty years ago," Shal began. "Tarl had just become a cleric of Tyr—under Anton's watchful eye, of course—and he journeyed with a dozen of his brethren to Phlan. Their mission was to deliver the Hammer of Tyr to the temple that had just been built here, and to join the few clerics already in residence. You see, in those days, most of the ancient city of Phlan lay in ruins, overrun by creatures of evil. Only a few sections, small bastions of light and order, were civilized. As they arrived at the outskirts of the city, the clerics were attacked by the undead of Valhingen Graveyard." Shal shook her head sadly. "Of the newly arrived clerics, all but Tarl and Anton were killed, and a dread vampire stole the hammer."

Listle drew her knees up to her chin, caught up in the tale. "You were in the city then, too, weren't you, Shal?"

The sorceress nodded. "I had come by means of a wishing ring, in hopes of finding what had become of my master. I had the good fortune to meet Tarl, as well as our closest friend, the ranger, Ren o' the Blade."

She shook her head, smiling fondly at the memories of her first adventures with Tarl and Ren. "Together, the three of us discovered that the leader of the city's Council of Ten was in league with an evil dragon, the Lord of the Ruins. As it turned out, the councilman was responsible for the death of my dear master, who had stood in his way, as well as the death of Ren's beloved Tempest, a thief who had stolen the magical ioun stones the dragon needed to control the pool of radiance that lay in the ruins. Together, we managed to defeat both the council leader and the dragon. Then Tarl fought the vampire in Valhingen Graveyard. With his faith in Tyr, he was victorious, and regained the hammer."

Shal set down her empty teacup. "With the hammer resting on the altar in the temple of Tyr, it wasn't long before the city began to grow and prosper. More and more of the ruins were rebuilt, the monsters driven away. Phlan was truly

restored, and it was the hammer's doing."

Listle nodded in understanding. "But with the hammer gone..."

"The process is reversing itself," Shal said grimly. "Eventually, Phlan will again become the ravaged place it was for so many centuries."

Listle's eyes went wide. "What are we going to do, Shal?" she asked breathlessly.

Shal tapped her chin thoughtfully. "I think I know someone who just might be able to help. The prophecy spoke of a magical pool somehow being involved in all of this, didn't it?"

Listle's head bobbed. "That's right. 'The twilight pool.'" She frowned, her bottom lip jutting out. "Whatever that is."

Shal laughed. "Well, there's only one expert on pools that I know of. Perhaps I should pay her a call. Come, let's go tell the others."

* * * * *

The sorceress bent over a small iron caldron hanging above a flickering fire. The special brew had to be exactly right. There was no margin for error. She pulled a few dried leaves from a leather pouch at her belt. Carefully, she crumpled them into the bubbling contents of the caldron.

The sorceress shivered, drawing her heavy sheepskin coat more tightly about her shoulders. The autumn air of the glade was chill with the coming winter. All around her, leaves fluttered down, mantling the ground with a crisp, crackling blanket of russet, crimson, and tarnished gold. Squirrels chattered in the branches of the ancient oak and ash trees that surrounded the clearing. The sorceress cocked her head, trying to listen to the small animals. After a minute she gave up. All squirrels ever seemed to talk about were acorns.

The sorceress sprinkled a pinch of black powder into the caldron. Close, very close, she thought. But not yet. She couldn't risk any mistakes. She leaned back against a fallen

tree trunk to wait and think. She was a woman who prized patience. Patience was the key to the greatest magic.

The sorceress was clad in deerskin breeches, a thick wine-colored tunic of fine wool, soft but remarkably tough boots of wyvern leather, and a heavy cloak of forest green, its weave so tight rain dripped right off it. It wasn't a wizard's typically gaudy garb, but it suited her perfectly.

All in all, there was a rather ageless quality about the sorceress. Her long, chestnut-colored hair was marked only by a single, rather dramatic streak of gray. At first glance the sorceress might have seemed a woman barely past her third decade, but there was a wisdom in her deep green eyes that was strangely at odds with her youthful appearance. And anyone versed in the magical arts who observed the sorceress at her craft would have realized instantly that she had far too much power to be as youthful as she appeared.

In truth, the sorceress was well over a century old.

Once, she had lived an entire lifetime as an ambitious mage, doing whatever she could to acquire more and more magical power. It was an ambition that ultimately had led to disaster. She had sought to exploit a legendary pool of radiance to make herself the greatest wizard in Faerun. But her ego had proved her downfall. She had not been able to control the chaotic enchantment emanating from the pool of radiance. She was blasted into unconsciousness, and when she awoke, she found herself no longer an aged wizard, but a young woman once again. All her skills as a sorceress were gone.

Others might have quit, given up. But she had been granted a chance to live again, and she did not intend to throw away such an opportunity. Realizing the perilous nature of the magical pools that were concealed throughout Faerun, she had vowed never to rest until she found and destroyed them all. She had begun her magical studies anew. This time she had not sought power only for power's sake, but instead to combat the force of the pools. Over the course of the last thirty years, she had destroyed more than a dozen of the

treacherous pools. Even so, her quest was far from over, if ever it truly would be.

Now she tended to the steaming caldron, adding a few more odds and ends from the numerous pouches strung along her belt. In her concentration, she did not hear the faint crackling of leaves in the trees behind her.

A pair of golden eyes gazed at the woman from the shadows of the forest. A lithe, tawny shape slunk between the trees, drawing closer to the glade. A stray beam of amber sunlight filtered its way through the branches above, briefly illuminating the stalker. It was a great cat, its muscles rippling under its smooth pelt. A beautiful creature, its buff-colored fur turned to a rich brown around its paws, muzzle, and the tip of its tail. Its eyes winking like green-gold gems, the cat's long whiskers twitched in anticipation. Its sensitive nose had caught the scent of the woman in the glade. A low rumble vibrated deep in the cat's throat.

The great cat padded to the edge of the clearing. The woman was no more than a dozen paces away, her attention focused on the fire. The feline's mouth opened slightly, revealing two stilettolike canines. It extended its razor-sharp claws as it crouched down, tail swishing, ready to pounce. It watched its prey, calculating the force necessary to land directly on the woman's back, and then—

"I know you're there, Gamaliel," the sorceress said in an amused voice. "I can feel your hot breath on the back of my neck."

With a groan, the great cat flopped down onto the leaves.

You're no fun, Evaine, the cat's pompous voice spoke inside the sorceress's mind.

"On the contrary," Evaine replied smugly as she turned around, "I think I'm heaps of fun."

She scratched the dejected-looking cat behind the ears. Gamaliel managed to resist her efforts for several seconds before desire got the better of him. He let out a deep, rumbling purr of pleasure, then rolled over, paws in the air.

"Let me guess," the sorceress mused. "I'm supposed to rub your tummy, is that it?"

Oh, wise wizard! came the reply. Your amazing powers of deduction truly astound me. Surely no other mage in Faerun can possess the intuition to rival your own!

"Flattery will get you everywhere, Gam," Evaine laughed. She began digging her fingers into the thick pelt covering the cat's chest. Gamaliel's green eyes closed until they were thin, gleaming slits. He began purring like an oversized kitten, which was pretty much what he looked like at the moment.

However, Evaine knew that looks could be deceiving. Over the years, the claws safely sheathed in Gamaliel's big, soft paws had ripped the life from countless enemies. Evaine had never met a warrior more ferocious or more deadly in battle than her great cat companion, and she rather doubted she ever would. Still, right now he was looking awfully cute—and somewhat silly. His rough, pink tongue lolled out of the side of his mouth.

I never look silly, came the testy reply to her thoughts.

The great cat was Evaine's familiar, so of course her mind and his were inextricably linked. Her first familiar, a snowy white owl, had died long years ago, during one of her quests to vanquish a magical pool. That had been a devastating blow. Evaine didn't know if she would ever have recovered if Gamaliel hadn't come along. Every mage, even the lowliest hedge wizard, needed a familiar—even if only a simple lizard or spider—but Evaine was lucky to have one such as Gamaliel. He was more than her protector. He was her truest friend, and she loved him dearly.

As well you should.

"You don't have to be so conceited about it."

I'm not being conceited, Gamaliel protested. I'm lovable, and you love me. What's wrong with that?

Evaine tried to think of a witty reply, but nothing came to mind. "Here, Gam," she said finally, getting up to stir the

contents of the bubbling caldron. "I want you to taste this." She used a wooden spoon to scoop up some of the curious liquid. Flecks of herbs drifted on the surface.

Gamaliel's pink nose wrinkled. Do I have to? I really don't want to be metamorphosed into a toad, you know.

"Don't be such a baby, Gamaliel. Besides, it isn't a magical potion. It's soup. Your favorite kind, even—rabbit, with thyme and fennel."

Why didn't you say so?

Gamaliel lapped the soup off the spoon with his big tongue. Suddenly a faint, shimmering light surrounded the cat. His tawny pelt began to undulate as his form started to change. In a blink, the great cat was gone. In his place was a handsome man, a tall, wild-looking barbarian. He sat cross-legged on the ground, holding the wooden spoon, clad in a buckskin coat and leggings trimmed with beadwork and fringe. A broadsword was belted at his hip, and his long tawny hair was tied back from his angular face by a leather thong. He regarded Evaine with glittering green eyes.

"It's easier to eat soup when you can hold a spoon," he offered by way of explanation. "Otherwise you tend to burn your tongue."

"I wouldn't know," Evaine laughed as she dished up two bowls of the steaming liquid.

Gamaliel was a shapeshifting cat, and as such he could opt for human form any time he wished. Generally, he preferred to be a great cat, but sometimes he liked the option of fingers.

The two friends ate their lunch, then Gamaliel helped Evaine gather her things. She had ventured into the forest that day to find a few herbs for her magical spells. But already the autumn day was drawing toward evening, and the golden beams of sunlight were fading.

"Let's go home, Gam."

Instantly, the barbarian's form blurred. A moment later the great cat bounded ahead through the trees, scouting ahead

for danger. Protecting his mistress was Gamaliel's sole concern.

The sun was setting in a sea of bronze clouds as Evaine and Gamaliel stopped before a seemingly impenetrable thicket of brambles and thorny bushes. It looked as if anyone who tried to force their way through the overgrowth would be taking a gamble.

"Gate!" Evaine intoned, lifting one hand in an intricate gesture.

There was a rustling as the brambles parted to either side, forming a walkway. Gamaliel ambled through, and Evaine followed. The thorn bushes immediately closed behind her. Wizards were secretive by nature, and did not generally leave their dwellings undisguised.

Beyond the hedge was a circular clearing in the midst of a grove of tall, majestic ash trees. The far side was bounded by the steep face of a hill. A waterfall tumbled down granite boulders to splash into a small pool of frothy water. Countless droplets caught and refracted the last light of the sun, glistening like diamonds on fire. On the edge of the pool sprawled a long, low, rambling log house. It was a comfortable and inviting place, not at all the usual wizard's domicile. Evaine had never much cared for towers and such. They were stuffy in summer, freezing in winter, and tended to dampness, which meant books often fell prey to mold. Most of the wizards Evaine had encountered in her time lived in towers simply because they thought that was what wizards were supposed to do, not because they cared for tower life.

Despite its rustic appearance, Evaine's home was as well guarded as any wizard's. The rough logs were not hewn from mundane trees. Rather, they were iron-oak trunks, felled by magic, for no axe could do more than scratch them. The large windows were not ordinary glass but thick plates of steel which Evaine had made magically transparent. The poppies and chrysanthemums that bordered the walkways

were bright and lovely, but each had been conjured of magical energy. They emanated a powerful protective ward around the house. Any creature of evil that tried to set foot inside would be burned to ashes.

Inside the house, Evaine spread the herbs she had gathered on a large oaken table and began sorting them. Gamaliel curled up by the hearth for a nap. He considered the bearskin rug before the fire his throne.

The house's main peak-roofed room was comforting in its clutter. Books weighed down pine shelves. Intricate, faded tapestries and animal pelts covered the walls. A stuffed, somewhat moth-eaten owlbear lurked in a corner, and a huge dwarven war drum served as a table for a scattering of elven runestones. Two overstuffed leather chairs, worn and comfortable with use, dominated the center of the room beneath an ornate chandelier imported from the southern empire of Calimshan. In all, it was an eclectic but hospitable room that spoke not so much of far travels as it did of frequent homecomings.

Evaine paused in her work, reflecting on the objects in the room. Most of them were souvenirs of her quests to destroy pools, she realized. In fact, she couldn't think of a single possession that she had acquired on a pleasure trip, or that a friend had given to her as a gift. She allowed herself a sigh. She wasn't sure why, but somehow the thought made her a little sad. Hunting down and destroying magical pools had been her whole life these last thirty years. It was a critical mission, but sometimes it made her feel just the slightest bit lonely.

Gamaliel's sharp ears caught her sigh. The great cat opened his green eyes and regarded his mistress. Worry flickered through his mind. Something had been bothering his sorceress of late, something that caused her to forgo sleep from time to time, or to neglect her meals. Gamaliel did not like that. His mistress's well-being was his preoccupation, and he wondered about the air of melancholy he had

detected lately. Of course he would have attacked any being that disturbed Evaine, rending it to bits. But the cause of Evaine's sorrow was obviously beyond his ability to correct with his claws. This troubled him. The cat racked his brain for a way to help her, but could think of nothing. He growled softly in frustration.

The sound snapped Evaine out of her reverie. She laughed then. What cause did she have to be so gloomy? I'll feel better when I find another pool to track down and destroy, she told herself.

"Come on, Gam," she said brightly. "Let's see about supper." Just as she stood, she heard a crystalline chime. Evaine frowned. "Now who could that be?"

She uttered a word of magic. Suddenly a shimmering spiral staircase appeared in the center of the room. Evaine quickly ascended, Gamaliel on her heels, entering a room that was in truth not located anywhere in her house. Or even in this world, for that matter. The room was a pocket dimension, a fragment of an alternate world, with the gateway located in Evaine's house. She used it as her private spellcasting chamber.

Evaine stood before a curious, eye-shaped mirror of polished silver. She waved a hand before the smooth surface. A face appeared in the mirror, that of a striking woman with brilliant green eyes and fiery hair.

"Shal!" Evaine said in surprise.

"Evaine, I'm glad I found you." Shal's voice sounded slightly distant, echoing as if it came from the opposite end of a long corridor. "I'm afraid there's trouble in Phlan. And I think it involves a pool."

Evaine felt a rush of both dread and anticipation. "Tell me," was all she said.

* * * * *

An hour later, after listening to her old friend Shal and asking a number of key questions, Evaine knew all there was to know. The hiding place of the Hammer of Tyr had been

discovered, but there was someone besides the clerics of Tyr who was determined to find it, someone with the power to summon a large number of deadly fiends.

"Kern is going to be journeying to the ruins of the red tower in three days," Shal explained, her voice heavy with worry. "I don't like the idea of him walking into unknown danger, Evaine. I want to know who it is who's after him."

Evaine thought for a long moment. "There is a way, Shal," she said finally. "But I think I will need some help."

"Anything," Shal said earnestly.

"We need to search for this mysterious enemy of yours, and we're going to have to leave our bodies behind." Evaine's mind worked quickly. "Whoever this foe is, he or she must be a wizard of some sort. And I have no doubt that the wizard is drawing on this pool of twilight. It takes enormous amounts of power to summon and control as many fiends as you've described. I know that all too well. Now, since Kern is the person this evil wizard of ours is after, we'll need to start by concentrating on him. But I can't do this effectively without you."

Evaine went on to explain the specifics of the spell—the material components, gestures, and necessary arcane incantations. When this was done, she took a deep breath.

"This spell will not be without risks, Shal," she warned her friend.

"They're risks I'm willing to take, Evaine."

Evaine didn't argue with her friend's resolve. "I'll be able to help you along. I have a fair amount of experience with this sort of thing." She grinned eagerly. Gods, but she loved magic. This was going to be exciting.

"Ready?" Evaine asked.

"Ready," the wizard of Denlor's Tower agreed.

Simultaneously, Evaine and Shal prepared to cast the spell—Evaine in her pocket dimension, Shal in her tower a hundred leagues to the northeast. Gamaliel stalked close to his mistress. Whenever she cast one of these spells, her body

was completely vulnerable. Though it was unlikely anyone would attack her here, it was Gamaliel's duty to watch over her. She could not be disturbed until she woke up from the spell. Otherwise, disaster would result.

Evaine lighted a small brazier, sprinkling on a handful of herbs. A flame flared up, crackling with blue, silver, and crimson sparks. She drew out a small quartz crystal from a velvet pouch and placed it gently on top of the brazier.

She closed her eyes and breathed in the pungent smoke, then whispered a strangely sibilant incantation three times as she moved her hands through a complex web of gestures. Evaine felt her ethereal self rising from her body. She could see all around, even though she had not opened her eyes. She reached forth a ghostly hand toward the mirror.

Shal. . .

She spoke in a voice inaudible to mundane ears, but Shal could hear her.

I'm here, Evaine. At least I think so. This is a bit unusual for me. ..

Evaine cautioned her friend. Don't fight the sensation. Just let yourself float, as if you're adrift in a warm sea. Now reach out to me, not with your arms but with your mind. I'll do the same.

Evaine concentrated, reaching out with tendrils of thought, searching. Then she connected.

I found you! came Shal's excited response.

You have indeed. Now let's go. The longer we're away from our bodies, the bigger our headaches will be when we wake up.

Evaine led the way. Her consciousness rose high into the air, Shal's in tow. The two sorceresses—or at least their spirits—sped southward. The slate gray surface of the Moonsea slipped away beneath them. It was much like flying, except there was no touch of wind or chill air.

Look! Shal exclaimed. The ships down there. They look like toys.

I know the scenery is breathtaking, Shal, but concentrate on the spell, Evaine warned. We're vulnerable to attacks now that we've left our physical selves behind. There are creatures that dwell—and feed—solely in the spirit realm.

Evaine felt a mental shiver emanate from Shal's presence. Having your spirit eaten—that's not a very comfortable thought.

Evaine laughed wryly. I imagine it's not a very comfortable feeling!

Holding hands as they sped on, the two sorceresses left the expanse of the Moonsea behind. Soon an eerie, disturbingly familiar shape loomed in the twilight before them.

The ruins of the red tower. Here Phlan had been captured by the Red Wizard Marcus twenty-two years earlier. The sorceresses swooped down to circle about the tower. The ruin looked like a jagged tombstone in the fading daylight.

Can you feel it? Shal asked in disgust.

Yes, there's still evil there, Evaine thought back. Powerful evil.

She could feel it radiating from the ruins in hot, nauseating waves. Something lurked down there, deep in the shadows below the tower, something eternally hungry, oozing with maleficence.

You need to think about Kern, Shal. We need to discover if this is the source of the evil that is directed toward him.

I'll try, Evaine.

Shal's thoughts were silent for several moments as they both concentrated. Suddenly, Evaine caught sight of a thin trail of inky darkness arcing back across the Moonsea, toward Phlan.

That's it! came Shal's thought. I can sense the evil reaching out toward Phlan. Her tone become hard. Whatever is down there, it loathes Kern.

And fears him, Evaine added after a moment. She gently probed the spindly trail of darkness. It felt oily to her ethereal fingers, but she couldn't detect any traces of active

magic in the pool they had destroyed two decades before.

I don't think this is the source, Shal. Something is down there, all right. Something powerful. But not a pool. I don't think this is the source of the fiends, or the foe we seek. Let's head toward Phlan and try again.

They raced across the deepening sky. The orb of the moon, Selune, lifted above the horizon, igniting the surface of the Moonsea with its cool, pearly fire. Soon they drifted over Phlan.

Evaine could see countless signs of the city's decay in the pale light of the moon. She'd had no idea Phlan had deteriorated so badly.

All right, Shal. Once more, I need you to focus all of your thoughts on Kern. Every last bit of your energy.

Evaine scanned in every direction, hoping to spot even the faintest clue. There! she thought excitedly.

What is it?

What we were looking for. She concentrated, helping Shal to see what Evaine had already noticed. A dull, metallic-looking streak rose up out of the city and reached away into the night, toward the northwest. There's something odd about the magic I'm sensing. It must be from a pool, yet it's like none I've ever dealt with before.

Is it a pool of radiance or darkness?

Evaine concentrated, then frowned. Neither. She gave up. We must follow it to its source.

The two sorceresses flew toward the distant peaks. The feeling of magical power intensified as they went. As the dark, jagged silhouettes of the Dragonspine Mountains loomed before them, the evil emanations grew stronger yet. Suddenly, Evaine felt the attention of another consciousness pass over her like a searing beam of light. There was someone—something—ahead, and it had sensed them coming!

Shal, you've got to break the spell.

Why? the wizard replied in confusion. What's wrong?

Please don't argue, Shal.

Evaine could sense the attitude of the mysterious being change from surprise to anger. It must be a guardian of some sort, Evaine realized. They were in grave peril!

You've got to—

Too late.

A blast of magic ripped through Evaine's mind. The guardian of the pool was assailing them with all of its dark power.

Evaine! Help me! came Shal's terrified plea.

Evaine tried to reach out, but her friend's presence became lost in the swirling maelstrom of magic.

Pain coursed through the core of Evaine's being. She felt her spirit being torn apart. In a moment there would be nothing left. She had to try something, but the roar in her mind made it so hard to think.

She heard one last faint cry from Shal. With every last shred of willpower, Evaine lunged for her friend, reaching out blindly with her ethereal fingers. She felt something brush her hand. She couldn't be sure it was Shal, but she had no more time. With her last spark of consciousness, she managed to gasp the word that broke the spell.

A shriek of pure malevolence rose from the very depths of the mountains. Then the enchantment shattered, and Evaine plunged down into unending darkness.

* * * * *

Waking was like swimming up through a cold, dark, bottomless sea. Finally, Evaine broke through the surface. She felt something warm and rough against her face. Gamaliel's tongue. She was alive!

She opened her eyes and smiled weakly. Gamaliel gazed at her with concern.

I almost lost you, he chided her. His tone was aloof, but Evaine knew he was afraid because his whiskers were twitching furiously. Do not do such a foolish thing again.

"Shal... ?" she managed to gasp. Then she was racked by a painful fit of coughing.

You must lie still. Gamaliel's tone was stern. I do not know about your wizard-friend. Your mirror shattered when the spell ended. Her loved ones will have to help her. My concern is for you.

"Just put me to bed, Gam," she managed to whisper hoarsely between agonizing breaths. She felt as though she had just lost a fight with a dozen angry ogres. "I need ... I need to rest. But you must do something for me in the meantime. Go to the Valley of the Falls. Ask Ren o' the Blade to come here as soon as he can. There's a pool somewhere in the Dragonspine Mountains, and no one knows that territory like Ren does. I must talk to him."

I can't simply leave you, the cat replied indignantly.

"I've lived through worse, Gam," she gasped, though she wasn't certain that was strictly true. "Now please. You've got to find Ren. I'm begging you."

Begging does not become you, Evaine, Gamaliel answered wryly. Very well, I will go. But remember, sorceress, you owe me one!

6

A Test of Worthiness

The dreamstalker approached the sleeper's chamber. The tower was surrounded by layer upon layer of magical wards and alarms, but they had caused no difficulty for the bastellus called Sigh. They were designed to keep corporeal foes at bay. They were useless against the dreamstalker.

The door to the sleeper's chamber was locked, but the darkness of his being slipped like black, oily smoke through the cracks around the door. The dreamstalker drifted silently toward the bed.

The sleeper was a young man with a broad, honest face and short red hair. Yes, he was the one. The wizard's spawn. Sigh's mistress, the sorceress Sirana, wanted him for her own. It was a simple enough task for the dreamstalker. He would slip into the young man's dreams and weave nightmares in his mind that would drive him to the brink of

madness. It would be easy enough to brand the mistress's message in the sleeper's susceptible brain. Soon, the boy's only thought, his only desire, would be to become Sirana's willing slave.

Sigh hovered above the bed. The young man's brow was wrinkled. A low moan escaped his throat. He was already caught in the throes of a nightmare. Excellent, the bastellus thought. Most excellent. This would make his task easier yet. A smile of shardlike ivory teeth appeared in the haze.

Sigh reached out hands full of countless fingers, like dark, spindly twigs. He prepared to plunge into the dreamer's psyche, to revel in his victim's subconscious, and to feed upon his spirit. The twig-fingers brushed the young man's troubled brow.

The dreamstalker screamed in soundless, ethereal agony. He had been burned! He looked down in astonishment to see that several of his dark, beautiful fingers had been transformed into a sticky mass of blue cobwebs. The bastellus writhed in pain. He had never known such a sensation before. Somehow the young man was immune to his touch.

Sigh shrank away from the hideous, vile human that had caused him pain. Blast Sirana! She could seduce the wretched creature herself. Sigh would have nothing more to do with this task.

The bastellus drifted quickly out the window and into the night, cradling his wounded hands. He would find another victim to feed upon, one with sweet, delicious dreams that would not harm his shadowy form.

Alone once more, the young man groaned in his sleep. Despite the bastellus's passing, the dreamer's nightmare—sent by the guardian of the hammer—had only just begun.

* * * * *

This time Kern knew he was dreaming.

Come, Hammerseeker! the dry, dusty voice spoke from the shadowed nave. Come, meet your doom!

Kern shook his head dizzily. He stood once again in the cavern of death. The skeletal spectators of the coffin walls jabbered and jeered at him in a gruesome cacophony. Bone splinters and broken teeth rained down. He gripped his battlehammer with a gauntleted hand. Somehow he knew he had to resist. To venture any closer was to die.

"Come out and face me!" he shouted to the darkened archway. Fear clutched at his heart with talons of ice. The thick, turgid shadows swirled angrily in the nave.

You show yourself for a coward, Hammerseeker, the ancient voice sneered.

The watchers in the coffin walls rattled their bones and clattered their teeth in a hideous mockery of laughter. Every instinct told Kern to run, but he planted his boots on the hard basalt floor. He was a paladin. He would stand firm.

"I will face you where I can see you!" Kern shouted.

Oh, you do not wish to look upon me, youngling. Believe these words I speak. Better for you that I cloak myself in shadow.

For a passing moment, the darkness of the nave lessened. Kern caught a glimpse of long—impossibly long—yellowed bones and, attached to these, a sinuous shape ending in a stiletto-sharp point. An eerie clicking sound issued from the nave, an insect noise that turned Kern's stomach. Then the curtain of blackness thickened. The guardian of Tyr's hammer was invisible once again.

Kern shook his head. The fetid air seemed to be weighing down upon him, pressing him toward the floor to smother him. His knees were on the verge of buckling, but he raised his hammer high.

"By Tyr in all his might, you will not have me!"

You are wrong, youngling! the voice shrieked with unholy rage. Dead wrong. An ear-shattering crack sundered the air of the cavern, a sound like a giant's bones breaking. The floor lurched wildly under Kern's feet. Suddenly a jagged rift appeared in the stone beneath him. It opened in the floor

like a vast, stony maw, a void of darkness ready to swallow him alive.

You will never have the hammer! Never!

Kern's arms flailed wildly as he tried to catch his balance, but to no avail. The gap opened wider yet. With a scream, he went tumbling down into thick, suffocating blackness.

Yes, join us! the mummified spectators screeched and cackled, their voices echoing after him. Embrace the bottom of the pit, Hammerseeker, and join us in death!

Another scream ripped from Kern's lungs. Shreds of darkness rushed by him as he fell. He knew there was nothing to break his fall except for the jagged rocks waiting at the bottom. And they were only heartbeats away.

* * * * *

If it hadn't been for Listle, Kern would have died. Of that he had no doubt. The wounds he had received in his previous dream had been real enough. If he had struck the jagged rocks at the bottom last night...

But he hadn't hit the bottom, he told himself for the tenth time already that morning. Listle had breezed into his room and woken him up just in time.

"I think you saved my life, Listle," he'd said breathlessly after telling the elf about his dream.

"That's all right, Kern," she had replied flippantly.

"Something tells me it won't be the last time." Despite her casual demeanor, fear had shone in her silver eyes.

Kern had made a resolution to himself, then. The next time he was plagued by a nightmare, he was determined to fight back and take control of the dream.

Clad in his usual gray tunic and breeches, Kern made his way down the spiral staircase in the center of Denlor's Tower. This last day had been a difficult one. Yesterday, Shal had ventured on a spirit journey with the sorceress Evaine, hoping to learn something about the enemy behind the attack on the temple. But something had gone wrong. His mother had cried out in shock and then fell into a deep

unconsciousness from which she had not woken. She lay now in her chamber, pale, silent, and terribly still.

Patriarch Anton had come to visit Shal three times already, but so far none of his healing spells had been successful. His diagnosis was grim. If Shal could not be awakened, she might eventually waste away. Already, dusky shadows had gathered in her cheeks and on her temples. There was only one thing that might have the power to wake her. The Hammer of Tyr. That made Kern's task all the more urgent.

Kern had decided to leave on the morrow. He found his father in the tower's main chamber. The two discussed preparations for the journey, but Kern did not tell Tarl about last night's disturbing dream. Shal's illness was burden enough.

"One last thing, Kern," the white-haired cleric of Tyr said. His face was haggard, his voice hoarse. He had stayed up all night, watching over Shal and sending prayers to Tyr, pleas that had gone unanswered. "You're going to need a new weapon."

Kern nodded. His hammer had been destroyed in the encounter with Slayer, the abishai.

"Could I choose one from your armory?"

Tarl shook his head. "I think not. I'd be happy to give you anything I have, but I don't know that a mundane warhammer—no matter how good—will be of much use to you. I fear that many of the foes you'll be facing will be magical in nature, and for that you will need a special weapon."

"But where am I going to find an enchanted hammer by tomorrow?" Kern asked in dismay.

"That's where I come in," said a silvery voice. With a shameless lack of decorum, Listle rose right up through the stone floor to stand between Tarl and Kern. Her teardrop-shaped ruby pendant flashed brilliantly for a moment on the end of its silver chain. "Now come on, Kern. We don't have all day, you know."

"All day for what?" he demanded in exasperation.

"Haven't you been listening?" The elf rolled her eyes in exaggerated frustration. "We're going to get you a warhammer, you oaf."

An hour later found Kern and Listle on horseback, the city of Phlan outlined in shadow on the horizon behind them.

"You never told me you had friends who lived near Phlan, Listle." Kern sat astride a handsome white palfrey, and Listle rode a delicate dappled gray mare.

"You never asked," she replied glibly.

"Now how did I know that was what you were going to say?" Kern grumbled.

The late autumn day was gray and dreary, heavy with a shroud of mist. Their mounts picked their way along a twisting trail in a forest a few leagues east of Phlan. A few drab brown leaves clung to the skeletal branches of the trees, rattling like bones in the chill wind. All this did little to improve Kern's mood.

"Actually, Kern," Listle went on more seriously, "I never mentioned my friends before because they're a rather secretive lot. And, as a rule, they don't particularly care for humans."

"Well, that's just marvelous," Kern said in a pained voice.

"Where did you meet these friends, anyway?"

"Oh, in Evermeet," Listle replied. "Hey, look there," she said suddenly, pointing to the sky. A glistening white hawk wheeled in the mist above them. "Do you think that's your father's work or Patriarch Anton's?"

Kern shrugged. "It could be the work of either, or possibly both. They're obviously keeping an eye on us."

It was a short while later that Kern noticed the change in the forest. The trees became green with leaves, and pale, sweet-scented wildflowers dotted the ground. It was as if they had abruptly left the advent of winter behind them, stepping through a doorway into spring. He looked at Listle in wonder. She laughed brightly. "We're almost there. Now behave

yourself, and let me do the talking."

A few minutes later they stopped at the roots of a huge, hoary old oak tree. It was truly a king of the forest, a massive giant that it would take a score of men with arms linked to encircle. Kern let out a whistle of amazement. The tree was at least a thousand years old.

Listle and Kern dismounted, looping the reins of their horses around a tree branch. The elf picked her way among the tree's gnarled roots, then rapped smartly three times on its rough bark. Before Kern could ask what she was up to, a high, reedy voice spoke.

"Who goes there?" the voice piped. Kern searched around for the speaker—then his jaw dropped.

A bumpy knot on the tree's trunk had transformed itself into a small gnarled face. Its lumpy nose ended in a small twig, and its eyes glowed caterpillar green. Listle appeared completely unsurprised.

"You know perfectly well who I am, Whorl," Listle humphed. "Now open up. I'm here to see Primul."

Whorl squinted suspiciously. "How do I know you're really Listle Onopordum?" the knot said in a splintery voice. "Look! You've got an axe-bearing tree-cleaver with you."

Kern cleared his throat nervously. "Actually, I don't have an axe with me, er, Whorl." He wasn't really accustomed to talking to bumps on trees.

"Hmmm, well now," Whorl mused. His twig-nose twitched in agitation. "You could be hiding an axe, waiting until I let my guard down to start chopping away at the old oak."

Listle's eyes flashed dangerously. "I'm getting tired of this, Whorl. Now open the door or..." Her ruby pendant sparkled as she plunged a hand deep into the wood of the tree directly beneath the knot. "... or I'll squeeze off your supply of sap."

"You wouldn't dare!" Whorl squeaked in horror.

"Try me." Listle's tone was serious.

"Primul will hear of this!"

"I have no doubt," the elf said dryly. "Now open up!"

"Oh, all right!" Whorl's gnarled face screwed up in concentration, and suddenly the wood of the tree trunk melded and shifted, revealing a perfectly round portal.

"Why, thank you, Whorl," Listle said with mock pleasantry. The knot only scowled at her, drawing mossy eyebrows down over glowering eyes.

"Are you coming, Kern?"

He supposed he didn't dare say no. With a furtive glance at Whorl, he followed Listle into the dimness of the doorway. The portal snapped shut tightly behind them. Listle whispered an incantation, and a pale sphere of light appeared above her head. Thanks to the magical illumination, Kern could see a stairway leading downward.

"Listle, where are we?" he demanded.

"In the dwelling of the green elf, Primul," she replied matter-of-factly, as if it were common knowledge. "Now come on. Primul's arguably the greatest blacksmith in all Faerun—at least in his own opinion, and I've seen no reason to doubt it. If you need a hammer to fight magical foes, this is the place to get it."

She plunged nimbly down the stairs, with Kern hurrying after her.

They found themselves in a huge chamber illuminated by some soft, sourceless emerald glow. Kern looked around in wonder. The chamber was perfectly round, its lofty ceiling supported by a tangled web of tree roots. All around were countless glass cabinets filled with the most marvelous weapons Kern had ever laid eyes on: rune-carved broadswords and bright sabres, curved daggers and deadly maces, along with hundreds of other weapons, many of which he could not even identify.

"Listle, just who is this Primul?"

"You'll see."

Suddenly, two sparks of light fluttered into the room. The sparks were almost identical in color, a shimmering

aquamarine. Except that one was just a little more green than blue, while the other was just a tad more blue than green. The brilliant sparks whirled about, almost as if excited. Abruptly the two points of light flared brightly and vanished. In their stead stood two of the kindest-looking elderly men Kern had ever seen.

Both of them were small and frail, their parchment-thin skin drawn over fine bones. Each had long hair and a flowing beard of snowy white, and each clung tightly to a staff with bony hands. By their pointed ears, Kern knew they must be elves, but he had never heard of any elves as wizened as these two. They were clad in robes as white as their hair, and their eyes were the exact same aquamarine hue as the sparks of light had been, one pair blue-green and the other green-blue.

Listle laughed for joy at the sight of the two ancient elves. "Brookwine! Winebrook!" she cried, embracing them jubilantly. They returned the embrace warmly, smiling two perfect, sweet smiles.

"It is wonderful—" Brookwine said in a warbling voice.

"—to see you—" Winebrook went on in a similar tone.

"—again, friend Listle." Brookwine finished.

Kern gawked at the two elves. They had spoken so rapidly in turn that it sounded almost as if only one person had been speaking.

"It has been quite—"

"—some time since we left—"

"—Sifahir's tower behind. Will you—"

"—stay with us for a—"

"—time, fair Listle?"

Listle sighed. "Much as I would love to, I'm afraid I can't. I've come on some dire business, Brookwine and Winebrook. It involves my friend here, Kern."

"Ah, yes!" Brookwine said, raising his snowy eyebrows. "It is the Hammer—"

"—seeker," Winebrook continued. "We are honored—"

"—to meet you, young human."

Unsure how to behave, Kern attempted a stiff bow with at least partial success. "Er, pleased to meet you," he managed to say. He wasn't sure which elf was which.

"We shall go—"

"—tell Primul of—"

"—your coming," the two wizened elves finished together. As quickly as they had materialized, they vanished. The two brilliant specks fluttered out of the chamber.

"How in the world can you tell them apart, Listle?" Kern asked when they had left.

"Isn't it easy?" the elf said in a miffed tone. "Brookwine's eyes are blue-green and Winebrook's eyes are green-blue."

"Oh, of course," Kern mumbled abashedly.

Suddenly the air of the chamber was shattered by a thunderous voice.

"Listle Onopordum! Is it truly you?"

Kern spun around to see what had to be the hugest elf in all the northlands stride into the room. He towered head and shoulders over Kern, his massive shoulders and chest knotted thickly with muscle beneath his forest green tunic. His broad face was open and strikingly handsome. Long golden hair was tied behind his neck with a silver wire. Around his waist was an intricate belt of fine golden links. Rumbling with laughter that shook the tree-hall like an earthquake, the gigantic elf crushed Listle in an embrace.

After a minute or so, she good-naturedly reminded Primul that she needed to breathe, and he set her down. Kern could only shake his head. So much for the general impression that all elves were delicate and wispy.

"Now, who is this specimen you've brought to my tree, Listle?" the big elf boomed. He turned his blazing, leaf-green eyes on Kern. "A human whelp?" Kern did his best not to shrink down into the floor.

"He's a friend, Primul," Listle soothed. "A good friend. I'd like to keep him in one piece."

Primul snorted. "Suit yourself. Although I'll have you know humans make terribly amusing noises when you pop their limbs off."

Kern blanched.

"Primul..." Listle warned.

"Sorry. Just having a little fun." He grinned broadly at Kern and winked. "No hard feelings, eh?"

"Of c-c-course not," Kern stammered.

Primul led the way to an expansive table where he firmly set his guests down and poured them each a cup of pale, sweet mead. The cup handed to Kern was beautifully crafted of silver, inlaid with lapis lazuli. Kern knew it was a vessel fit for a king's hall, but Primul seemed to treat the chalices as if they were made of ordinary clay.

"Did you see Brookwine and Winebrook?" Primul asked Listle as he quaffed his third cup of mead in as many minutes.

Listle nodded. "They look wonderful."

Primul rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Well, they're better than when Sifahir had them in magical chains, that's for sure. But something tells me they'll never really be their old selves." For a moment a look of sorrow crossed his broad face. Then his expression cheered. "Say, Kern, has Listle ever told you how she helped us escape from the tower of the evil wizard Sifahir?"

Kern shot a puzzled glance at Listle. What was Primul talking about? The young elf looked distinctly uncomfortable.

"That's how we met," Primul went on in his rumbling voice.

"It was about ten years ago. You see, there was an elven wizard who lived on a small rocky island north of Evermeet, the homeland of the gray elves. His name was Sifahir, and you've never met a wizard with a darker heart. He brought all sorts of people under his enchantment, using them for his wicked purposes until the very life was squeezed out of them. Then he would throw their dried husks away without a second thought"

The big elf shook his head sadly. "I won't trouble you with all

the dark deeds Sifahir performed to become one of the most powerful wizards in Faerun. It would give you a hard time sleeping at night just to think of it. Anyway, I had the misfortune of attracting Sifahir's notice. Folks said I was the best blacksmith in a hundred kingdoms—they were right, of course—and Sifahir heard about me and decided he wanted me to be his own private smith. He sent an army of magical warriors to capture me, and they proved too much even for my axe."

His leaf green eyes grew distant as he continued. "For two centuries I was imprisoned in Sifahir's tower, forced to forge weapons for him and his minions if I cared to stay alive. After the first fifty years of trying to escape, I gave up all hope. Sifahir's magic was just too strong."

A realization struck Kern. "Brookwine and Winebrook—they were imprisoned by Sifahir, too?"

Primul nodded solemnly. "They had already been there for several centuries before I was captured. Both of them were mages of great skill, and Sifahir had chained them above the gates of his tower, harnessing and draining their magical power to fuel the vile defenses that surrounded his abode."

Listle spoke up, her voice heavy with sorrow and her demeanor uncharacteristically subdued. "Sifahir twisted their magic to his own evil purposes, century after century. I don't think we can ever understand what torture that must have been for them. That they survived at all is a wonder. I think it helped that they relied on each other so much, drawing closer and closer until the distinction between their personalities blurred, and they melded almost like one being. Together, they found the strength to survive."

"But not without consequences," Primul added sadly, pouring another cup of mead. "Once they were strong, handsome elves. Now their bodies are so fragile a good wind might blow them away. And the scars on their spirits are deep."

The green elf waved a big hand, dispelling the somber

atmosphere. "But that is all ancient history. Sifahir had not counted on one of his prisoners being able to walk through walls of stone. Listle was the first person ever to escape from Sifahir's tower. And her ability was such that she took the rest of us with her. For which we shall always be in her debt." Listle stood to bow deeply. "It was my pleasure, master-smith."

Kern scratched his head, trying to absorb this tale. He had never really thought much about Listle's past. He had known she hailed from Evermeet, but that was all. Seeing her in a heroic light would take some adjustment. "Listle," he ventured, "you haven't told how you were captured by this Sifahir character."

For just a moment, all the spark and humor drained out of Listle. She went utterly white. A hand unconsciously crept up to grip the ruby pendant at her throat. Primul shot her a questioning look, one golden eyebrow raised.

"It isn't important," she said stiffly.

Kern decided to let it go. Obviously she did not care to relive the painful memory. Someday, Kern vowed silently, this mage Sifahir is going to answer for what he did to Listle and her friends.

"Besides," Listle said, resuming her typically brisk air, "we have more pressing things to attend to. Or have you forgotten about the Hammer of Tyr, Kern?"

The two took turns telling the elven blacksmith their story: the riddle of the tome, the plight of the clerics, and the predicament of Phlan. When they had finished, the big elf regarded Kern thoughtfully. "A warhammer for a quest, eh? All right, young human, follow me."

Primul led them down a side passage that opened into a small chamber, lit by the ruddy glow of a furnace. The smell of hot steel hung sharply on the air, and the walls were lined with all manner of tools: pincers and vises, hammers and bellows.

The green elf's smithy.

Primul gestured to a wooden workbench. On it lay the most beautiful hammer Kern had ever seen. Iron and silver were folded together throughout the weapon in a marbled pattern. A ring of silver encircled each head. The haft was etched with fine elven runes. Kern didn't even need to pick it up to know that the hammer was perfectly weighted and balanced.

"It's beautiful," he said reverently.

"Actually," Primul countered, "it's flawed. I was trying to forge a new alloy of hard steel and enchanted silver. But the two refused to mix. I can't guarantee that, given a hard enough blow, the hammer won't shatter. Still, if it's magical foes you're fighting, you'll find no weapon with a more potent enchantment than this. It's yours..."

Kern's eyes lit up in excitement.

"... if you pass a small test," the elven smith finished, displaying pointed white teeth in a sly smile.

"A test?"

"That's right," Primul replied. "After all, I'm not going to give a hammer to just anybody who wanders into my workshop, friend of Listle or not. I have to find out if you're worthy of such a hammer. Will you agree to the test?"

"Kern," Listle warned. "You might want to hear what the test is first, before you—"

He cut her off. The warhammer was too wondrous; he simply had to have it. "I'll accept your test, Primul," he said boldly, "and I'll pass it, too."

"Kern!" Listle groaned.

"We'll see," was all Primul said.

The big elf strode to the other side of the chamber. He halted before a table bearing a huge, rune-covered axe. The weapon gleamed eerily in the crimson forge-light.

Listle shifted nervously from one foot to the other. "I could have negotiated for the hammer, you know," she hissed to Kern.

"Bargaining isn't honorable," he whispered back.

"Would-be paladin!" she snorted.

"The test is simple, human." There was a deep, rumbling mirth in the elven smith's voice. "All you have to do is pick up that axe and lop off my head."

"What?" Kern thought he had heard the elf wrong.

"I'll even kneel to make it easier," Primul added. "And I won't resist you in any way. All you have to do is swing the axe. If you're strong enough, my head should come off quite nicely."

Listle crossed her arms, regarding Primul suspiciously.

"That's it? That's the test?"

"Well, there is one more part," the big blond elf confessed.

"After Kern has his swing, if I'm still alive and able, I'll try the same on him. Blow for blow. That's honorable enough."

"But my blow will kill you," Kern protested.

Primul shrugged his monumental shoulders. "Then the hammer will be all yours, human." His brow furrowed in a scowl. "You're not reneging on your word of honor, are you?"

"Never!" Kern didn't much care for chopping off the head of his host, but he didn't know what else he could do. He had agreed to the test. Perhaps Primul doubted Kern was strong enough to wield the heavy hammer. Was that the point? If so, Kern would prove him wrong, with fatal results.

"Let the test begin!" Primul bellowed. He knelt before Kern, bowing his head and holding aside his long golden hair so that Kern would have a clean view of his neck.

Kern hefted the heavy battle-axe. It wasn't his usual weapon, but he handled the weighty axe with ease. Besides, how much skill did it take to cut off someone's head? He certainly knew how to chop wood. How different could it be to chop off a head?

"Kern, you can't do this!" Listle hissed in desperation.

"I don't seem to have any choice, Listle," he said reluctantly.

"He's the one holding me to my word."

Listle chewed on her lip in frustration.

"Do it, human!" Primul shouted.

Kern lifted the axe above his head, its sharp edge gleaming wickedly. He took careful aim at the elf's neck and steeled his will. Tyr forgive me, he murmured inwardly. Then he tensed his shoulders and swung the axe.

It was an exquisitely honed weapon, and it passed through Primul's neck cleanly.

Green blood spurted out in a fountain as the big elf's head bounced to the floor. Listle clamped a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide with horror. Kern dropped the axe, feeling more than just a little sick. He wished he hadn't gone through with it. He had liked the burly elf.

"Well, at least we've got the hammer," he said grimly.

"I wouldn't count on that, human."

It was Primul who had spoken, or rather, the big elf's head. It grinned roguishly where it lay on the floor. Suddenly the big elf's body lurched to its feet, the golden belt about its waist glowing brightly. The fountain of emerald blood slowed to a trickle, then stopped. While Kern and Listle gaped in utter astonishment, Primul's body reached out with groping arms until it located the elf's head. The arms raised the head up and set it back on Primul's shoulders where it belonged. There was a faint sucking sound, and all trace of the gory wound receded.

Primul laughed and laughed, a rich sound like the tolling of a bell. The big elf was whole once again.

"Now, human," he said, picking up the axe. "It's your turn!"

7

A Dire Message

"You tricked us, Primul!" Listle fumed.

"What trick?" the big elf rumbled jovially, patting the fine golden chain around his waist. "Did you ask me if I had a magic belt? I certainly didn't hear you ask me if I had a magic belt."

"It doesn't matter," she countered, her silver eyes molten with fury.

"He's right, Listle," Kern said grimly. It had been his mistake

to agree to the green elf's test. Now he had to bear the consequences.

"Shut up, Kern," she snapped. "We already know that your skull is full of rocks." She angrily poked a finger against Primul's barrel chest. "Release him from the bargain, Primul. Now."

"Fine," the elf spat in disgust, his green eyes tinged with fiery crimson. "I'll release you, human, and you can run away with your dishonorable tail between your legs like a cur."

"No, Primul," Kern said calmly, surprised at the grit in his own voice. "I gave you my word. I won't back down." He held up a hand before Listle could protest. "I know what you're going to say. I have an important quest to complete. That's true. But if I break my word, then I am not a man of honor, and I don't deserve to be a true paladin. Tyr would never allow me to gain his hammer, anyway. It would all be for nothing. At least this way"—he gulped—"I die like a paladin. Tell my parents I died with honor." Kern's heart beat wildly in his chest.

Listle stared at him, too stunned for further protest.

"I'm ready, Primul." Kern knelt and bowed his head.

"Excellent," the massive elf said, easily hefting the heavy battle-axe in one hand.

Kern whispered a prayer to Tyr. He hadn't expected things to end up this way, but he hoped Tarl would not be too disappointed in him. At least he had preserved his honor.

"Prepare to meet your creator, human," Primul said with a deep, hearty chuckle. He raised the axe.

Kern forced himself to stare ahead. He was determined not to flinch. He would not show himself a coward.

"Now!" the green elf bellowed fearfully.

Kern steeled his will. He heard the axe whistling through the air as it descended. But Kern tapped an inner reservoir of strength and determination he did not realize he possessed. He did not even bat an eyelash.

At the last possible moment, Primul turned his fatal swing.

The bright edge of the axe just brushed the skin of Kern's neck, nicking it. Kern felt a small, hot trickle of blood run down his back. Primul's good-natured laughter filled the chamber.

"Primul," Listle scolded, "if this is all your idea of a joke, let me be the first to tell you that I'm not laughing."

"It is no joke, Listle. Here, on your feet, human." He reached down a big hand and hoisted a rather stunned Kern to his feet. "If Kern here had begged for mercy, or had shown any sign of fear—even the slightest flinch—I would have happily hewn his head off." He put a friendly arm around Kern's shoulders, squeezing so hard Kern thought his eyes would pop out. "You showed yourself a man of courage, Kern. That was the test. The hammer is yours."

Kern couldn't suppress a jubilant grin, not in the least because his head was still attached to his shoulders. "Thank you, Primul."

"Don't thank me," Primul said, crossing his arms and tossing his long tail of golden hair back. "Honor the gift. Defeat your foes. That will be gratitude enough."

Hardly believing his good fortune, Kern slowly picked up the magical, beautifully marbled warhammer. "I will, Primul. I promise."

"Humph!" was all Listle said.

* * * * *

The young archer pulled back on the bowstring until the arrow's red-feathered fletching just brushed her cheek.

"Bow, make this one fly like a hawk," she murmured. The polished ashwood bow seemed to reply with a faint, humming resonance. She released her hold. The bowstring twanged brightly, and the red-feathered arrow streaked through the chill, mist-laden air. It arced almost impossibly high above a rocky defile where a mountain stream raced over granite boulders. Then the arrow plummeted toward the far, heather-covered slope. It passed straight through the center of a small straw target and buried itself up to its

fletching in the damp turf. The archer lowered the bow with a grin of satisfaction.

"You did it, Daile!" the tall man standing next to her cried excitedly. "That target is three hundred feet away if it's a step." The man was a lean, rangy fellow, handsome despite a somewhat weathered appearance. The red-gold of his neatly trimmed beard and shoulder-length hair was shot with gray, and long years of trekking in the outdoors had tanned his face like leather. But he was still obviously a hale man.

"I had a little help from the bow," Daile said, smoothing her thumb along the well-polished arc of wood.

Ren had made the bow for her over the summer. It was a long, diligent process. First he had searched the forest for the right sapling, one in which he could see the natural shape of a bow. Then he had stripped its bark, split it, and soaked the wood in water before shaping it into a long graceful arc and curing it over a slow fire. Ren had carved many bows in his life, but this time he added one different step.

For several nights he sat up late, smoothing the pale wood of the bow with two small dark stones. They were ioun stones, and magical in nature. Usually he kept them in the hilts of the daggers he wore in his boots. As he polished with the ioun stones, the bow took on a deep, vibrant luster. Finally, he could feel the weapon humming in his hands, and he knew it was ready.

He gave the bow to Daile for her birthday. Instantly she had realized there was something unique about the weapon. Once she began using it, she found she could aim more accurately and shoot farther than she had ever dreamed possible.

"A bow is only as good as the archer using it," Ren noted with a wolfish smile. "I imagine the next orcs who wander into the valley are going to be surprised when they find arrows sticking out of their throats with no archers in sight."

He laughed loudly at that, slapping his leather leggings.

"That is, if you leave any orcs for me, Father," Daile replied. She knew her father all too well. Orcs that wandered within a dozen leagues of him seemed to have a difficult time keeping their heads attached to their bodies.

"Humor an old man, Daile. Killing orcs is my only real fun these days."

She sighed dramatically, as if making a terribly great sacrifice. "Oh, very well, Father. You can behead the orcs, if you absolutely must." She smiled mischievously. "But the kobolds are mine."

The man snorted. "Selfish child." He laughed deeply. "You're my daughter, all right."

"Whether you like it or not," Daile answered. She gathered their possessions into a leather pack, then slung the pack over a shoulder. She and Ren often went out on all-day sojourns through the woodland and heath of the Valley of the Falls. It gave her a chance to practice her forest skills. And though her father never said so, she knew these wanderings also gave him the opportunity to tramp and explore the land he loved.

"Let's head home," she said, plunging into a grove of ghost-pale aspens. "I'll make supper."

"What are you cooking tonight?" Ren asked.

"Orc stew."

He made a gagging sound. "You're joking."

Daile didn't answer.

"Please say you're joking, Daile." His voice was a trifle desperate this time.

Daile only hummed a cheerful ditty, deftly picking her way along a faint forest trail that would have been invisible to an untrained eye. All Ren could do was shake his head and follow, grumbling under his breath something about where he must have gone wrong rearing his troublesome daughter. Leading the way up the forested slope, Daile emerged from the autumn-colored forest, finding herself on the high, rocky

crest of granite that Ren affectionately dubbed Dead Orc Ridge. The ridge bounded the west side of the Valley of the Falls, the valley that had been Daile's home for all eighteen years of her life. She paused, surveying the patchwork of forest and glade below. The valley was a deep, steep-sided bowl, carved long ago out of the rock by a glacier. Running through the valley's center was the narrow gorge where Daile liked to practice her archery skills. The stream had its source in a waterfall that tumbled down a sheer, thousand-foot cliff at the valley's north end.

Daile cocked her head. Even now she could hear the ceaseless roar of the waterfall, though soon its voice would be silenced by the freezing breath of winter. Not that Daile minded. Winter might give her and her father the chance to do some ice-climbing, making their way up the frozen falls with naught but two ice picks, some iron pitons, and a rope. If she could coax her father along on such an adventure, that is.

"I was beginning to think I'd lost you," she said cheerily, as Ren finally appeared out of the woods, scrambling up the scree to the ridgetop, his chest heaving. He was sweating despite the cold air sharp with the scent of snow.

"You know, you're really not as amusing as you think you are, Daile," Ren observed acidly. He sank to a boulder and accepted the leather waterskin his daughter handed him. "Just wait until old age creeps up on you. I imagine you won't find life quite so funny."

Daile frowned, chewing her lip. These last two years she had noticed a gradual, disturbing change in Ren. And it wasn't that his hair was a little grayer or that he was more cantankerous because his joints were stiff in the morning. After all, he had been gray and cantankerous for years. It was as if, one day, he had suddenly decided that he was old. Once he did, all of the aches and pains that had never bothered him before suddenly combined to slow him down. Unfortunately, Daile could guess at the reason for the shift

in her father's outlook. The change had begun not long after the two of them had laid a beautiful, pale-haired druidess within a cairn of cold gray stone beside the waterfall.

"You're not all that old, Father," Daile said firmly.

"It's not polite to argue with your elders, young lady," Ren countered. But he laughed then, his old, devilish laugh, and Daile couldn't help but join in. He held out a hand, and she pulled him up off the rock with a grunt. Then the two began picking their way swiftly across the jagged top of Dead Orc Ridge. A league south of the waterfall they plunged back down into the forest, heading for the small clearing where their dwelling stood.

Ren took the lead now. They were nearly home when a faint sound brought Daile to a halt. She scanned the shadows among the towering spruces and lodgepole pines. Some instinct made her unsling her bow. Quietly but swiftly, she nocked an arrow.

Something stirred in the dimness between the trees. She caught two brief flashes of emerald. Eyes. Something was stalking them, drawing closer. Holding her breath, she raised the bow. "Seek the heart, bow," she whispered to the weapon. A faint quivering of the polished wood told her that the bow understood her words.

Suddenly, her stalker separated itself from the shadows of the forest. It was a great cat, its powerful muscles rippling under its tawny coat. Its maw was slightly open, revealing dagger-length canines, its eyes showing green fire.

Daile did not hesitate. She drew the arrow to her cheek and aimed. The animal snarled, tensing for a leap.

"No!" a voice shouted.

Just as Daile released her grip on the bowstring, a hand struck her bow, knocking the weapon aside. The arrow went wild, sinking into the trunk of a dead lodgepole with a thunk. The cat froze in reaction.

"Father, what are you doing?" she exclaimed.

"Quiet, Daile."

She shook her head in confusion. Was Ren trying to get them killed? To her astonishment, her father walked right up to the ferocious feline.

'This is crazy,' Daile grumbled. She nocked another arrow, ready to slay the animal if it made a move. Then Ren did something that almost made her drop the weapon.

"It's been a long time, Gamaliel." He spoke softly to the great cat

The cat seemed to nod in reply. A shimmering radiance appeared around the animal. Its tawny fur began to undulate, and suddenly the cat was gone. In its place stood a tall barbarian man clad in fringed leather, a broadsword at his hip. But his eyes were the same emerald green as the cat's, his hair an identical tawny gold.

The arrow slipped from Daile's fingers.

"Greetings, Ren," the man who had been a cat said in a rich, growling tenor. He turned toward Daile. "And greetings to you as well, archer." A faint smile touched the barbarian's lips. "Do not be concerned," he assured her. "I would not have allowed you to harm me with your arrows."

Ren reached out and gripped the barbarian's arms in greeting. "I'd like to think you're paying me a visit because you've missed me, Gamaliel, but I have a feeling that I'd be deluding myself."

"Perhaps, ranger," the barbarian replied, his expression unreadable.

Daile could stand it no longer. "Father, what in the world is going on?"

"I trust Gamaliel here is going to tell us."

The barbarian nodded, his chiseled face solemn. "Evaine bid me to find you, Ren. She has learned of another pool." His eyes flashed from bright green to deep gold. "Phlan is in grave peril."

"Again?" Ren snorted. "It must be habit-forming." The ranger eyed the sky through the overhead branches. "It's getting dark. Can we discuss this at the keep? It's a little too chilly

out here for these old bones."

The barbarian looked surprised at Ren's words, but nodded. "Lead the way."

There was nothing for Daile to do but follow.

An hour later found the three of them gathered around a stout oaken table in the center of the stone-walled keep. Daile had cleared away the supper dishes and poured three steaming mugs of mulled wine. She tentatively handed a mug to Gamaliel. He accepted it with a wordless nod. She tried to smile, but the expression faltered badly.

Hurriedly she sat down and hid her face behind her own mug. The green-eyed barbarian made her dreadfully uncomfortable, mostly because she had nearly shot him with her magical bow.

Gamaliel had told them his reason for coming in short, terse sentences. The message was simple. Kern, the son of Ren's best friends, was about to set off on a quest to find the lost Hammer of Tyr. But Gamaliel's mistress, the sorceress Evaine, had learned that a mysterious, evil wizard also sought the hammer and was drawing power from a magical pool. This was not the first time Daile had heard of the dreaded pools. She knew that Ren had helped to destroy two of them many years ago.

"The pool is hidden somewhere in the Dragonspine Mountains," Gamaliel finished. The firelight played across his sharp, striking features. "Evaine has need of your knowledge and experience. You will return with me."

Ren's eyes flashed angrily. Then suddenly he let out a guffaw, slapping his knee. "You never did bandy words, Gamaliel. I don't know why I should expect you to now."

Daile held her breath, watching the two men closely. She knew from stories that Ren and the barbarian had not cared for each other at their first meeting. But over the years, their mutual respect had drawn them into a grudging sort of friendship.

"All right," Ren grumbled. "Winter's coming on, and the gods

know I'd rather spend it drinking ale by a fire than traipsing about the countryside. But I'll go if Evaine needs me."

Daile's spirit soared, but she did her best to contain her excitement. If she played her cards right, maybe, just maybe, her father would let her come along on this promising adventure.

"Good," was Gamaliel's only reply. He drained his mug of wine. The barbarian looked around the small, tidy room then. "Tell me, Ren. Where is the druidess, Ciela?"

Ren stood up abruptly, his chair scraping loudly against the wooden floor. "I've got to chop some more wood for the fire," he murmured, as if he had not heard the barbarian's question. He headed out into the cold, moonlit night.

Gamaliel watched him go, then turned to regard Daile. "Have I said something wrong?"

Daile stood to ladle more mulled wine for the barbarian. "You couldn't have known," she said sadly, sitting back down. "My mother—Ciela—died two winters ago." She looked around the keep. Everywhere there were still signs of the gentle druid woman: a chair she had fashioned of willow branches magically wended together, a wreath of holly that stayed perpetually green hanging above the mantel, a beautifully polished walking staff she had always taken with her on her long walks through the forest. Daile hung her head, her short red-gold hair shining in the firelight. She wondered that her mother's death could hurt so much after all this time.

"You miss her," Gamaliel said in his oddly matter-of-fact voice. "That is well."

"How so?" Daile found herself asking.

"It means that she was worth knowing."

Daile felt her heart strangely buoyed by Gamaliel's simple words. She smiled at him gratefully.

Abruptly the iron-banded door swung open, and Ren stepped through. He wasn't carrying any firewood, but Daile chose not to mention this obvious fact. "Be ready to leave at

dawn," Ren told Gamaliel gruffly. "And Daile..."

She sighed. "I know, Father. I'll repair the chinks in the walls while you're away."

"Oh, really?" Ren stroked his beard with a mischievous expression. "Well, all right, Daile, if you really want to. Of course, I was hoping you'd come with me on this particular journey, but I do know how much you enjoy patching the walls with mud."

Daile's heart leaped. She couldn't believe her good fortune. She let out a whoop of joy and sprang up to give her father a hug. "I love you!" she exclaimed, kissing his bearded cheek for emphasis.

Ren grinned at Gamaliel. "Sometimes having a daughter is almost worth the trouble."

"So it seems," the barbarian observed.

8

Allies New and Old

It was verging on dusk when Kern and Listle rode through the unguarded Death Gates and into the dank, murky streets of the city. The fog and rain did nothing to conceal Phlan's decay. If anything, the dreary elements emphasized the squalor and filth. The cold rain was gritty and acrid with soot, streaking all the city's buildings with dark, leprous stains. It was hard to tell which of the heaps in the gutters were piles of refuse and which were bloated, rat-gnawed corpses. All smelled vile. The loud rain did nothing to mask the curses, screams, and wicked laughter that drifted down from dimly lit windows.

Kern's spirits, so high after gaining the enchanted silver and steel warhammer, instantly plummeted. Even if he did manage to recover the Hammer of Tyr, he wondered if he could do it in time to save the fast deteriorating city.

The young warrior and elf rode into a desolate square. Once the marble fountain in its center had bubbled with clear, sweet water. Now black sludge oozed from the urn clasped by a stone cherub. The liquid gurgled sickeningly into the

fountain's half-full basin. So much for watering the horses here, Kern thought glumly. He swung his palfrey in the direction of Denlor's Tower.

Pounding hoofbeats shattered the air.

Wide-eyed, Kern whirled his mount around. Listle did likewise with her dapple gray.

Both stared as a huge knight mounted on a coal-black charger thundered into the square.

The knight was clad in armor of purest jet, the oval of his shield as dark as a starless sky. His face was concealed by a visor, two crimson points of light glowing hungrily behind the narrow eye slit. Instead of a feathered plume, a gout of livid scarlet flame flickered atop the black knight's helm. The dark rider's onyx charger snorted crimson fire, and sulfurous smoke blasted out of flaring nostrils. Brilliant sparks flew from hooves that shattered cobblestones with every stride.

The black knight lowered his steel-tipped lance, digging cruelly barbed spurs into the charger's flanks. The horse let out a bloodcurdling sound as it leaped into a gallop. The black knight intended to run Kern through.

There was no time to consider options.

Kern dove out of the saddle. He hit the grimy cobbles hard and rolled, ignoring the flash of pain in his shoulder. The crushing hooves of the onyx charger passed so close, flying sparks left pinprick burns on Kern's skin.

Breathless, he staggered to his feet. The charger's momentum had carried it to the opposite side of the square, but already the black knight was wheeling the massive horse around.

"Listle, ride for the tower!" he shouted. The elf had guided her mount behind the scant protection of the marble fountain.

"What? And leave you to have all the fun?" she shouted back.

Kern cursed under his breath. Why didn't she ever do

anything he told her to do? The black knight lowered his lance again, ready for another charge. Kern looked wildly about for cover, but there was nothing close by to do him any good. He made a pathetically easy target, standing there in the middle of the empty square.

"You don't suppose this is just another one of Primul's tests?" he called out to the elf hopefully.

"No," Listle snapped. "I don't."

"I didn't think so," Kern gulped.

The black knight dug in his spurs again, his crimson eyes glowing murderously. Blood streamed darkly down the charger's flanks as it lunged forward; its hoofbeats rent the air.

Deliberately, Kern reached for the steel and silver hammer at his belt. He gripped it firmly in both hands and raised it above his head, planting his feet on the slimy street. If he tried to run, his foe would simply skewer him in the back. He tensed his muscles, waiting for the right moment to hurl his hammer.

"Kern, no!" Listle screamed.

Abruptly a wall of searing fire ignited before the knight. Even from a distance, Kern could feel the scorching heat.

"Take that!" Listle cried.

The onyx charger didn't so much as pause. It galloped straight through the blazing barrier. The magical wall burst apart in a spray of harmless sparks, revealing itself as an illusion. The knight did not flinch. He lowered the tip of his lance. The steed charged.

Kern tensed, waiting... waiting for the precise moment in which to hurl the warhammer.

He never got the chance.

A streak of lightning crackled out of nowhere, striking the black knight.

The midnight charger reared up on its hind legs with a terrible whinny. Tendrils of magical energy crept up the knight's armor, snaking into the visor's eye slit. The lance

burst asunder. The knight clenched a fist, letting out a horrible scream.

Another bolt of magical lightning exploded against the black knight's breastplate. This time Kern could discern its source—it came from the shadowed mouth of an alley on the edge of the square.

The charger reared again, then suddenly dissipated in a cloud of acrid smoke. The knight crashed to the cobbles and lay still. The flaming plume atop his helm guttered and died out. A few last sparks of magical energy skittered across his armor.

Cautiously Kern approached the fallen knight. With the toe of his boot, he tapped the scorched breastplate. A thin wisp of yellow smoke drifted out of the visor's eye slit. That was all.

"I think he's dead," Kern said grimly, returning the magical hammer to his belt.

"Oh? And what gave you that bright idea?" Listle said in a wan attempt at a jest. She couldn't stop shivering.

"Oh, he's well and truly dead," a rich, musical voice interjected.

Kern and Listle turned in surprise. A woman stepped from the dim arch of an alleyway.

She was beautiful. Her eyes and hair were a deep, dark color that seemed to glow with radiance. Her skin had a smooth, coppery sheen to it, and her features were finely wrought, almost aristocratic. She was obviously a wizard of some sort, but the white full-length robe she wore was different from the shapeless utilitarian smocks kindly old sorcerers favored. The shimmering cloth was diaphanous and slightly translucent in the fading daylight, hinting at an alluring shape underneath.

The woman walked fluidly toward Kern and Listle. The elf eyed her warily, but Kern offered a friendly smile.

"Are you hurt, good paladin?" the mysterious wizard asked kindly, her voice concerned.

"No, we're all right. Thanks to your spell, that is." Kern did his best to sound noble. She had called him paladin! He resisted the urge to shoot a smug glance at Listle. "Your intervention came just in time."

"Of course, we were doing just fine on our own," Listle noted sullenly.

"Of course," the wizard agreed, nodding graciously in Listle's direction.

Kern frowned at the elf. "But the help was welcome all the same," he added pointedly, smoothing over Listle's rude remark. Couldn't she even be civil to a stranger who had just saved their lives? Sometimes the elf infuriated Kern.

"I'm Kern Desanea," he ventured, "and this is Listle Onopordum."

The wizard held out a graceful hand. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Kern gripped the proffered hand and gave it an awkward shake. A slightly bemused expression crossed the wizard's face.

"I don't know how we can repay you for your help..." he said, hesitating gallantly, "but if there's anything we can do, you have only to ask."

"There's no need for repayment," the wizard replied with a dazzling smile. "Though it was a happy accident that I decided to journey all the way to Phlan this evening. I have been traveling south these last few days, from the Dragonspine Mountains. I intended to make camp north of the city this afternoon, but when it began to rain, I decided to push on. I'm glad now that I did." She cast a glance at the fallen knight. "Do you know who that villain was? Or why he might have had cause to attack you?"

"Something tells me it has to do with the quest I'm setting off on tomorrow."

"Quest?" the wizard asked.

"I'll be journeying in search of a holy relic, the Hammer of Tyr."

"A holy relic? That sounds like a terribly important task." Suddenly the wizard looked crestfallen. "And I suppose that means you wouldn't be able to ... Oh, but never mind."

"What is it?" Kern asked.

"It's nothing, really..."

"Tell me," he insisted gently.

She hesitated, her expression unsure, then shrugged.

"I suppose there's no harm in telling you why I came to Phlan. I was hoping to find adventurers who might be willing to journey back to the Dragonspine Mountains with me. That's where my tower is. You see, I'm a wild mage. I learned magic from an old hermit rather than in a formal school in one of the cities on the Moonsea. But now the valley where my tower stands has been overrun by a band of gnolls. They ..." She sighed deeply. "They killed my mentor. I suppose I ought to leave the valley, but it's always been my home. I can't just abandon it to those awful gnolls. Unfortunately, the monsters are too many for me to fight alone. So I came here, hoping to hire a few able warriors such as yourself to help me." She smiled briskly. "But you're busy, I can see, so I'll leave you to your—"

"Stop right there," Kern ordered. She gazed at him in evident surprise. "We owe you a great deal for what you did here. Now, I'm not certain how long my quest for the hammer will take, but you have my solemn promise that, as soon as my job is completed, I'll journey to your place in the mountains to teach those gnolls a lesson."

Listle rolled her eyes. "Oh, brother," she muttered. Preoccupied as he was with his own bold pronouncements, Kern did not hear her.

The wild mage chewed her lip delicately. Abruptly she laughed. "That is certainly kind of you, paladin. In return, I volunteer to accompany you on your journey, to help you find this hammer you're so terribly interested in. That way I can be certain you'll return in good enough health to be of some assistance to me. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough!" Kern agreed with a grin.

As they discussed the details, Kern felt his spirits rising. Tymora, Lady of Fortune, was smiling on him this evening, that was for certain. The mage promised to show up at the door of Denlor's Tower at dawn, and Kern and Listle bid her farewell.

"Wait a minute," Kern said, pausing as he and Listle turned to ride from the square. "We don't even know your name."

A smile glistened on the wild mage's copper-tinted lips.

"Sirana," she said in her rich, musical voice. "My name is Sirana."

* * * * *

Listle and Kern spoke little on the way back to Denlor's Tower. They unsaddled their horses in the courtyard and went inside. The tower's extensive magical defenses—first created by the mage Denlor and enhanced by Shal—sensed their identities and so permitted them to pass unharmed. Had they been uninvited strangers, the invisible aura woven around the tower would have incinerated them.

They found Tarl high in the tower, sitting by Shal's side in a darkened room. Listle lit a candle against the night, but its pale light did little to lift the gloom of the place.

"How is she, Father?" Kern asked quietly.

The big-shouldered cleric drew in a deep breath. "No better, I'm afraid. And perhaps worse. Anton was here earlier. He cast a spell of healing on her, but like the others, it had little effect. Her spirit was too far from her body when she was struck down. Anton believes that her spirit is lost, or too weak to return." Tarl rubbed a hand wearily across his brow. "Only the Hammer of Tyr has the power to bring Shal's spirit back to us."

Kern gripped his father's hand tightly. Without her spirit, Shal's body would continue to waste away. Eventually there would be nothing left but an empty husk. But that won't happen, Kern thought fiercely, not if I can do something about it.

"Now, Kern," Tarl said, a note of cheer in his voice. "I can just make out a silver and green glow hovering at your side. Did you find a magical hammer at the green elf's?"

Kern nodded, grinning despite himself. They left Shal alone then, to sleep in peace. The two men went downstairs to talk by the fire. Listle ascended to Shal's laboratory, intent on studying her spellbook. But try as she might, she simply couldn't concentrate. There was too much on her mind. And in her heart.

She closed her silvery eyes and suddenly could see Primul's glistening battle-axe descending again in its fatal arc. She shuddered at the memory. She had been so afraid. If Kern had flinched ... if Primul hadn't stopped his swing at the last second ... A cold tightness filled her chest. It was a sensation she had never felt before, not until that moment when she had thought she might lose Kern.

She opened her eyes, biting her lip fiercely.

"Oh, no you don't, Listle Onopordum," she muttered angrily to herself. "Other elves—other beings—can feel like this. But not you. Don't fool yourself into thinking like that, not even for a moment."

A spark of light flared briefly inside the ruby pendant at her throat, but she did not notice. With great dint of will, she turned her mind to other, more important matters.

The wild mage, Sirana.

There was something about the female wizard that Listle didn't like, not least of all the way she had practically thrown herself at Kern.

Listle went over the conversation with Sirana a dozen times in her head, but could find nothing about it to prove her suspicions about the wild mage. If only she could talk to Shal about her, but Shal was deathly ill. Listle sighed. Finally, she turned to her spellbook, burying her nose in its pages.

She was just snuffing out the candle when a thought struck her.

Who in her right mind, Listle wondered, would journey from the frigid heights of the Dragonspine Mountains clad only in a flimsy robe of white gauze?

"Rise, Hoag. They have gone."

Sirana waved a fine-boned hand over the form of the fallen black knight.

Two points of crimson light flared to life behind the helm's visor. The knight rose to his feet, then genuflected ceremoniously before Sirana. This evoked a deep laugh from the half-fiend sorceress. "I trust my magic left you unharmed, faithful Hoag, as I promised it would."

The black knight nodded, standing tall. "I am unharmed, mistress, though the pain was tremendous." The glowing eyes flickered. "But then, pain is of no moment to me. As always, I am grateful to serve."

"Excellent, Hoag." The full moon had torn through the concealing clouds. Sirana's robe glowed eerily in the pale light. Despite the sharp air, she felt not the slightest chill. The fire of hate that burned within her was too strong. "You have done your task well tonight. I will summon you again when I have need of you. And I will have need of you." She laughed again, malevolently. "That foolish paladin-puppy has invited me along on his quest just as I planned."

A hissing sound emanated from the black knight's helm.

"Beware, mistress. Paladins, like clerics, may be able to sense your dark nature."

"I think not, Hoag. I have woven a dozen magical protections about myself. Besides,"—Sirana gazed at her hands, coppery-colored even in the washed-out light of the moon—"the twilight pool is like nothing they have ever experienced before. All-powerful. No, if those fool disciples of Tyr sense anything about me, it will be magic of unusual power. And," she cooed, "what more could they wish for in an ally?"

Hoag did not reply. The fiend simply bowed to the wisdom of his mistress.

* * * * *

It was nearly midnight when Kern left the quiet haven of Denlor's Tower and slipped away through Phlan's ill-lit streets.

Tarl had fallen asleep in a chair, sitting by his stricken wife's bed as he did every night. It had been easy to pad down the stairs without waking him. Sneaking past Listle's room had proven more nerve-wracking. The elf's ears were more sensitive than any human's, and she was a light sleeper. It would have ruined everything if Listle had woken up and spied him. Nothing would have been able to keep her from following him. However, Tymora, Goddess of Luck, appeared to be watching over him still. Kern made it out of the tower undetected.

He glanced up at the full moon, high in a sky littered with fast-moving clouds. He had to hurry; it was almost time.

He had covered his mist-gray tunic with a cloak of midnight blue. At his hip was Primul's warhammer. He moved swiftly through shadowed avenues, past the blankly staring windows of moldering, abandoned buildings.

The moon was directly overhead when he reached the edge of Valhingen Graveyard. It was midnight. Just in time.

The cemetery was one of the most ancient places in Phlan, sitting atop the crest of a low hill in a thinly populated section of the city. It was here that, on his first journey to Phlan, Tarl had encountered a horde of undead under the command of a vampire lord. The undead cruelly slew Tarl's brethren, and the vampire took the Hammer of Tyr from the cleric. Tarl had barely escaped with his life. But later, Tarl, Shal, and Ren had returned to defeat the undead of Valhingen Graveyard. That was more than thirty years ago.

Kern pushed through the graveyard's rusting wrought-iron gate. Crumbling tombstones and dilapidated mausoleums glowed strangely in the ethereal moonlight. Nettles and witchgrass tangled the footpaths, scratching at his ankles as he passed. The graveyard was a forsaken place. Few, if any,

ventured here anymore. There was little enough worth placed on life these days in Phlan; no one could be bothered to pay respect to the dead.

Kern pushed his way through the weeds, toward a newer-looking crypt that stood in the center of the cemetery. A sound to his left made him freeze. Hair prickled on the back of his neck; his heart jumped. He listened for a moment and finally decided the sound had simply been his imagination. He started down the path once more.

And heard the sound again.

It was a faint scraping noise, like stone moving across stone. Slowly, Kern turned to his left.

Something was stirring inside a marble ossuary.

The ornately carved coffin had been cracked open, like a gigantic stone egg. Something stirred in the darkness within. Backlit by the silvery moon, a ghostlike shadow had begun to rise out of the ossuary.

With one hand Kern gripped the holy symbol of Tyr, with his other he hefted the enchanted hammer. The ghost-shadow stretched two ghastly appendages toward him. He had heard that, with a mere touch, such spirit creatures could drain the warmth of life right out of a man. He did not want to find out if such stories were true.

He gripped the holy symbol hanging from a chain about his neck. "Begone, spirit of evil!" he cried out

The ghost giggled.

Kern frowned in puzzlement. Somehow that was not the reaction he had expected. Then the ghost-shadow stepped lithely out of the ossuary and into a soft beam of moonlight. Kern groaned in dismay.

"Listle!"

The elf was still giggling. " 'Begone, spirit of evil!' "she mimicked in a deep voice. "Oh, that was just great, Kern. I'm sure a real ghost would have just broken down and run at that!" She collapsed in a fit of hilarity onto the stone coffin. Her laughter seemed out of place in the somber cemetery.

"Quiet!" Kern hissed, gazing around, eyes wide. He didn't suppose there was anyone—anything—for the elf's laughter to disturb, but why take chances?

In deference to his tone of voice—or perhaps because she herself noticed the peculiar way the air in this place seemed to strangle her mirth—Listle abruptly fell silent.

"What are you doing here?" Kern whispered harshly.

Listle glanced nervously at the crumbling tombstones. All the humor seemed to have drained out of her. "What do you think, you oaf? I wanted to find out what you were up to."

Kern mumbled a curse under his breath. He knew he might as well tell her. Sending her back to the tower would never do at this point. "I've come to spend the night in vigil at the shrine of the paladin, Miltiades. He was one of the bravest paladins who ever served Tyr, both in life a thousand years ago, and when he was raised from the tomb by Tyr to help save Phlan from the Red Wizard, just before I was born. Praying at the tomb of a great hero is something paladins do to gain guidance and strength before they set off on a quest. I really wouldn't expect you to understand."

"Oh? Why not?"

Kern growled. "Just keep out of my way, all right?"

"That could be difficult, what with your big feet," Listle whispered.

Kern ignored her, stepping through the archway leading into the crypt of Miltiades, Listle on his heels. Though the monument in memory of the esteemed paladin had been erected a scant twenty-two years ago, it seemed to have already fallen under the blight that afflicted the rest of Phlan. Dark moss covered the granite walls, and damp, musty-smelling water pooled on the floor. A stone sarcophagus dominated one end of the crypt. On its lid was carved a likeness of Tyr's scales of justice.

"Do me a favor, Kern," Listle whispered, crossing her arms to protect against a shiver. "If I die, don't bury me in this creepy graveyard. You can just cover my body with a pile of

leaves in the forest instead. That would do just nicely."

"That's fine talk," Kern grumbled. "Can't you simply be quiet for a change?"

"Don't be silly," Listle said indignantly.

Kern found a dry patch of stone before the sarcophagus and knelt down on the ground, while Listle stayed close to the crypt's entrance. He gripped his holy symbol and bowed his head, trying to clear his mind before beginning his prayers.

"Er, Kern..." Listle interrupted.

Kern muttered another oath as the elf's voice broke his concentration. "Now what?" he asked in annoyance, standing and turning to face the elf, hands on hips.

"Sorry to bother you." Her silvery eyes were wide. "I just thought you might like to know that there are shadows moving out there. Lots of shadows. And they're coming this way."

Something in the elf's voice told Kern that this was not another one of her pranks. He gazed out the crypt's entrance. At first he could see nothing. Then the moon passed from behind a cloud, and he took in a sharp breath.

A dozen smoky shapes flitted among the rotting tombstones, creeping toward the paladin's shrine. A dozen burning pairs of eyes stared hungrily. Kern's heart lurched in his chest.

"Wraiths..." he breathed.

"What can we do?" Listle asked tremulously.

"Get ready to fight. And at all cost, don't let them lay a hand on you. One touch is all it takes to freeze your heart."

Powerful undead creatures, wraiths were the spirits of long-deceased humans who hungered yet for the blood of life. The presence of two living creatures had awakened them from their slumber, and now they intended to feed.

The wraiths drifted closer, their eyes glowing. Kern drew his hammer from his belt, but he didn't know how much good one weapon—enchanted or not—would do against a mob of wraiths.

The shadowy forms reached out dark, spindly arms, ready to

bestow death upon their victims.

"May Tyr protect us," Kern murmured.

Suddenly a brilliant sapphire light burst into existence behind Kern and Listle, radiating from deep inside the crypt.

"That he will do, young paladin!" a voice boomed.

The blinding radiance shone forth from the entrance of the crypt, its beams piercing the nebulous bodies of the wraiths. The undead creatures let out soundless screams, writhing in agony as the magical light tore into them. With a collective sigh, the remnants of the wraiths sank back into the dank earth and were gone. The cerulean light dimmed but did not altogether vanish.

Kern and Listle spun about. They saw two things.

The first was that the heavy stone lid of the sarcophagus was askew.

The second was that they were not alone.

A man stood before the sarcophagus. He was clad from head to toe in burnished steel armor, armor that was ornate and oddly archaic looking, bespeaking the customs of another, bygone age. Emblazoned on his breastplate were the golden scales of Tyr, marking him as a paladin. In his gauntleted hand was an unadorned shield, this the source of the holy light.

"Who ... who are you?" Listle gasped.

In answer, the paladin flipped back the visor of his helm. Listle clamped a hand over her mouth in terror. The face revealed was not that of a living man. It was a skull. Withered skin, as brittle as parchment, clung to its bones, and a few wisps of dry, strawlike hair hung to either side. The paladin seemed to gaze at them with dark, hollow eye sockets.

"Miltiades!" Kern whispered in awe.

The undead paladin nodded solemnly. "In the flesh." The perpetual grin of death he wore widened even farther. "Er, figuratively speaking, that is."

9

The Quest Begun

The questers gathered in the courtyard before Denlor's Tower in the steely predawn light.

Kern saddled his white palfrey, making certain the saddlebags bulging with provisions were securely fastened. Listle was already sitting astride her dappled gray, but then the nimble elf never bothered with tedious details like saddles or reins. Nor did she need saddlebags. Countless small pouches—bulging with myriad spell components—hung around the wide strip of leather she had used to belt her oversized tunic of green wool.

Kern frowned as he glanced at the silver-eyed illusionist. He didn't recall asking Listle to accompany him on the quest. Not that he minded. Her magic was bound to come in handy. It just might have been nice if she had at least pretended the decision was up to him.

A thought struck him. "We don't have a horse for you, Sir...er...Sir Miltiades."

The undead knight had been standing silently on the edge of the courtyard in his archaic, intricately wrought armor. "There is no need to call me 'Sir,' Kern," Miltiades said. There was a faint note of humor in the ghostly voice that echoed inside the knight's faceplate.

Kern swallowed hard. "All right, Si—er, Miltiades. Should I go see if they have a horse we can buy at the city's livery? It would only take a few minutes."

The paladin shook his head. "That will not be necessary. I have my own steed to bear me."

From a black velvet pouch, Miltiades drew a small ivory figurine carved in the likeness of a horse. He set the carving on the ground, uttering a single sibilant word. The figurine flared brightly, and suddenly a magnificent, snow-white horse stood in the courtyard. The animal tossed its shining mane, its silver-studded barding jingling pleasantly.

"That's a handy trick," Listle said, gazing at the equine in open admiration. "Instantaneous horse."

"It is good to see you again, Eritophenes." Miltiades greeted

the horse, and the magical stallion snorted, stamping a hoof in reply. The feeling was apparently mutual.

Kern shivered, but he wasn't certain if it was from the morning chill or from standing so close to the undead paladin. While everything about Miltiades' manner was noble and kind, it was hard for Kern to forget that the paladin was ... well, dead, for lack of a better description. A coldness always seemed to linger near the knight, along with a faint, dusty aroma that reminded Kern of the graveyard. Needless to say, the paladin's presence was going to take a little getting used to.

The wild mage, Sirana, appeared out of the shadows, astride a skittish roan stallion with a perfect white star on its forehead. When she saw Kern, she smiled.

"Are you ready for your quest, paladin?" she asked in her sultry voice.

Kern blushed, mumbling something unintelligible in reply. Sirana's stunning smile widened.

The wild mage wore only a cream-colored traveling cloak over her thin white robe. This warranted a clear look of disapproval on Listle's part. However, before the elf could comment, Tarl and Anton stepped out of the tower, bearing a few more odds and ends the travelers might find useful on their journey.

Both clerics had been astonished to see their old friend Miltiades that morning, but pleased, of course. It was certainly a sign that Tyr favored them, Anton had said.

"You're riding off on a grand adventure, Kern," the grizzled patriarch said wistfully. "I almost wish I could journey with you." A hopeful light shone in his eyes.

"No, Patriarch Anton, it is not fated to be," Miltiades said, understanding Anton's look.

"But there are only four of you," Anton protested. "The prophecy states that five should journey in search of the hammer."

"The fifth we will meet before we reach our destination,"

Miltiades answered. "That much Tyr has revealed to me, though who the fifth will be, I cannot say." The paladin laid a cold gauntlet on the big cleric's shoulder. "Besides, good Anton. Something tells me your strength will be needed here in Phlan while we are away. Your strength, and that of Tarl Desanea."

The patriarch hung his head forlornly for a moment. Then he looked up, laughing. "Oh, who am I fooling?" he rumbled. "I always break out in saddle sores after ten minutes of riding. Leave the quests to the young ones." He looked suddenly uncomfortable. "Er, present company excluded, of course."

"Of course," Miltiades murmured.

Tarl stepped forward and gripped his son's arms tightly. "May Tyr go with you, Kern."

"I'll do my best, Father," Kern said quietly.

The white-haired cleric nodded, his expression intent. "I know you will, Son. Shal and I will be waiting for you."

Neither had to say that speed was of the essence. Time was Shal's greatest enemy now. Kern had to act swiftly to gain the hammer and return before it was too late. Father and son embraced tightly.

It was time to bid farewell.

The four riders guided their mounts out of the courtyard of Denlor's Tower. The quest for the lost hammer had begun.

* * * * *

The sun was barely visible amid a sea of clouds as the four rode through the empty streets of the city. Frost had etched Phlan's buildings with its pale gilding during the night, and the air was bitterly cold. By the time they reached the city's edge, the overcast sky hung dark, low, and sullen above the city rooftops.

Kern led the way through the Death Gates astride his sleek palfrey. Sirana followed close behind, with Listle next on her dappled gray, unconsciously frowning at the beautiful wild mage. Last to ride through the gate was the undead paladin Miltiades. A banner flew from the tip of the lance he held

upright, its butt-end braced in his stirrup. The wind caught the banner, unfurling it, and the golden scales of Tyr shone dully in the dim light.

Phlan faded into the distance as Kern guided his mount west along the pebble-strewn shore of the Moonsea. The ruins of the red tower lay to the southwest, across the vast lake. While a ship would have made for a shorter journey, sailing on the Moonsea was risky during the winter months. Sudden snow squalls could arise out of nowhere, icing up a ship's rigging and snapping its mast in a matter of minutes. Not only was an overland journey safer, it would allow them the opportunity to stop by the dwelling of the sorceress Evaine.

Kern's armor was cold against his skin as he rode, but he ignored it as best he could. He rested his hand on the warhammer at his hip. Already its weight at his side was growing comfortable. Slung over his left shoulder was the shield Miltiades had borne when he appeared in the crypt. The undead paladin had presented it to Kern last night, a gift from the god Tyr himself. Kern was so dumbfounded he would have completely forgotten to voice his thanks if Listle hadn't elbowed him hard in the ribs. The silver shield was without adornment—as befit a paladin-aspirant. Kern would be granted an emblem of his own on the day he became a true paladin. If that day ever came, he thought with a sigh.

They had been riding perhaps an hour when Sirana guided her mount close to Kern's.

"There's a storm coming in off the Moonsea."

Kern couldn't help but marvel at the beautiful mage's voice. It was rich and smoky. Even simple words seemed musical when she spoke them.

"How do you know?"

"Can't you feel it?" A look of surprise crossed her face. Then she laughed. "I'm sorry. Of course you can't. Sometimes I forget that not everyone grew up a wizard in the wilderness." She scanned the placid surface of the Moonsea. The water and the sky were the same dull shade of gray, so

that it was impossible to tell where the two met on the horizon. "I can sense the storm approaching. It's like ..." She searched for the right words. "It's like a power in the air." She turned her gaze on Kern. "An energy I can feel tingling against my skin. Right now a few snowflakes whirl by, but by evening snow will blanket the land. However, the storm will be less severe farther from the Moonsea. We may care to ride a few leagues inland."

"If you think we should," Kern agreed. "Let's confer with Miltiades."

"It is your quest, Kern," the undead paladin said from the back of his white mount. "We will do as you see fit."

Kern swallowed hard. He had naturally assumed that Miltiades would act as the group's leader. Apparently that was not to be so. He drew a deep breath. He hadn't expected to be giving orders to a legendary hero like the paladin.

Sirana turned toward Listle, who was riding bareback nearby. "What do think?" the wild mage asked the elf. "As a sorceress, I'm certain you can feel the storm coming as well as I."

"Of course," Listle lied, gritting her teeth. Oh, she wished she could wipe that smug look off the wild mage's pretty face. They weren't even halfway through the first day, and Sirana already had Kern wrapped neatly around her little finger.

"Good," Sirana smiled. "Shall we ride inland then?"

"Oh, I don't know," Listle replied, her voice dripping honey.

"I'm rather fond of getting caught in blizzards, sinking into deep snowdrifts, and freezing perfectly solid. Aren't you?"

"Well, I'm not certain now," Sirana said without a trace of sarcasm. "You make it sound so pleasant."

Listle glared at her, then wheeled her horse away from the frozen edge of the Moonsea, heading inland.

Kern shook his head as he rode after the elf and the wild mage. "Something tells me this is going to be a long journey," he muttered to no one in particular.

* * * * *

"Look at this." Daile knelt in the leafy litter of the forest floor. She brushed away bits of dry, crackling bracken to reveal a single hoofprint pressed into a small patch of cold mud.

Gamaliel crouched beside her. The great cat had assumed his barbarian form this morning, as he usually did when he traveled with humans other than just Evaine.

"There was a hard frost last night," Daile went on. "This damp spot couldn't have melted until well after dawn. I'd say this track is no more than a quarter hour old."

Gamaliel nodded, his chiseled face intent. "Red deer. A young buck, I would guess. Two points. Perhaps three. Still fat this early in winter."

Daile stood swiftly, the morning sunlight weaving strands of fire through her short red-gold hair. With practiced ease she strung her polished ashwood bow. It gave a faint, musical hum of anticipation. She looked excitedly at Gamaliel.

"Let's go."

The two moved easily among the gray, leafless trees, Daile every bit as silent as the lean and powerful barbarian. She cleared her mind of all thoughts, letting the sights, sounds, and scents of the forest soak into her being. Caught up as she was in the hunt, she did not notice the quiet look of approval Gamaliel bestowed on her.

She is skilled for one so young, Gamaliel thought. She tries to be part of the forest, rather than master of it. His earlier suspicions were confirmed. Yes, he decided, she possesses the wild gift. She hears the voice of the wind.

Daile pushed her way through a tangle of branches and found herself looking into a small glade. She froze.

The buck was beautiful.

He stood at the edge of a pond, bending his head to drink from a hole in the ice that he had made with a fore-hoof. His coat was the color of dried leaves, and he had not yet shed his antlers. Each bore three curving points.

She turned to warn Gamaliel to be silent, but the barbarian

had disappeared. He must be close behind, she thought, but she couldn't wait for him to catch up. The wind was unpredictable; the buck might sense her presence any second. She nocked an arrow and carefully raised her bow.

Too late.

The buck's head sprang up, diamond-clear droplets spraying from his muzzle. His deep brown eyes widened, velvety nostrils flaring. He had caught her scent. Before she could draw and release her arrow, the buck bounded toward the opposite edge of the clearing and the safety of the trees. Daile started to lower her bow in disappointment.

Suddenly the forest air was riven by a snarling cry.

A lithe, tawny shape leaped out of the forest, ivory white fangs bared.

The buck whirled abruptly at this new, more palpable terror. Its hooves skidded on the ice at the pond's edge as it tried to flee back across the glade—back into the range of Daile's weapon. She did not waste this second chance.

"Let it be swift, bow," she whispered. She released the red-feathered arrow.

The arrow's flight was true, piercing the buck's wildly beating heart. The animal collapsed instantly to the ground. Daile lowered her bow, her blood pounding in exhilaration.

"Good timing," she said to the great cat padding leisurely across the clearing.

The cat's form shimmered brightly.

"Thank you," Gamaliel said gruffly, human once again.

The two butchered the buck with quick, practiced strokes. Though the deer was a magnificent creature, Daile had no regrets about slaying it. The venison would sustain her and her father on their journey back to the Valley of the Falls, and they could leave plenty behind for Gamaliel and Evaine. The buck's hide would not be wasted either. Daile intended to tan it and make a new pair of boots for her father. Death was as much a part of the forest as the constant spectacle of life, Daile well knew.

They wrapped the venison in the deer's hide and started back toward Evaine and Gamaliel's home. Ren and the sorceress would be waiting for them.

Yesterday, Evaine had tapped into Ren's memories of the Dragonspine Mountains in order to conjure a magical map of the region. She would be able to use the map in conjunction with her spells to help locate the pool she and Shal had sensed in the mountains. Not that she would be able to journey there any time soon. The sorceress was still greatly weakened from her recent ordeal. She could hardly get out of bed, let alone begin a winter's journey into the perilous Dragonspine Mountains.

The two hunters were nearly to Evaine's dwelling when they heard the shouting of voices interspersed with the clash of steel. Sounds of fighting.

Daile shot Gamaliel a worried look. Instantly the barbarian vanished, the great cat loping swiftly down the footpath in his place. Gripping her bow, Daile sprinted after him.

She burst from the shadows of the forest a second behind Gamaliel, only to be greeted by a rather strange sight: four people were being attacked by a hedge of thornbushes.

It was the sort of thing that could happen only in the vicinity of a wizard's dwelling. Evaine had mentioned that the hedge surrounding her clearing served to keep intruders out, but Daile hadn't imagined anything quite like this. A dozen bushes had uprooted themselves from the ground and now circled menacingly around four strangers, lashing out with branches bearing long, sharp barbs.

Two of the strangers were well protected by their shining armor, but the other two—young women both—bled from several scratches on their arms. All were doing their best to hold the enchanted brambles at bay.

"I cannot dispel the magic that animates them!" cried one of the women. She was clad in a flowing white robe, now rent and torn in several places. "The wizard who created them must be strong indeed."

Fire fanned out from the second woman's outstretched fingers, but did not so much as singe the bushes. "I've heard of the expression 'a thorn in my side,' but this is ridiculous," the mage—an elf, Daile could see by her delicate, pointed ears—said with a frown.

"Take that!" one of the armored knights shouted, swinging a strangely mottled warhammer at one of the bushes. Branches snapped and splinters flew as the bush toppled to the ground. At the same time, another bush snaked out a sinuous branch to wrap around the hammer-wielding stranger's ankles, intent on dragging him to the ground. But the moment the branch touched the knight, it was instantly transformed into sticky blue cobwebs. The magical bush shuddered and contracted.

The knight spun around to attack another thornbush. Only then did Daile catch a glimpse of his face. She gasped in astonishment.

"Kern!" she cried out.

The strangers halted momentarily in their fighting, looking up at Daile and Gamaliel in surprise.

Daile hadn't seen the young man in many years, not since he visited the Valley of the Falls with his parents one summer, but she could never have mistaken him. It was Kern Desanea, son of her father's close friends, Tarl and Shal of the city of Phlan.

"Gamaliel, can you call off Evaine's defenses?" she asked desperately.

The great cat shifted back into his barbarian form and regarded her for a scant second before nodding. "Surrahk!" he cried. Immediately, the thornbushes shuffled obediently back to the hedge, sinking their roots into the soil once more. They quivered briefly, then were still.

The four wanderers lowered their weapons gratefully.

Kern's eyebrows knit themselves in concentration. "Daile?" he asked tentatively.

She laughed in answer, throwing her arms around him in a

joyous embrace. He returned the gesture warmly.

"Daile, what are you doing here?" he asked, taking a step back to look at Daile.

"Saving you, it would seem," she laughed. "It's a good thing we came along when we did. I'd hate to be the one to have to tell Tarl and Shal that their son was beaten in battle by a rosebush."

"At least they wouldn't have to send flowers to the funeral," Listle added with a snort. The young paladin-aspirant shot the elven mage an annoyed glance.

Kern's armored companion stepped forward then, raising a gauntleted hand.

"It has been some time, Gamaliel."

The knight's voice carried a tinny echo that made Daile's heart skip a beat in her chest.

"It has indeed, Miltiades," Gamaliel answered, a rare look of wonderment crossing the usually stoic face of the barbarian.

"Evaine will be pleased to see you again, as am I."

Slowly the knight raised the visor of his ornate helm.

Daile clamped a hand over her mouth in horror. It wasn't the face of a man she found herself staring at, but instead a hollow-eyed skull wearing a perpetual, lipless grin.

"Don't worry," the silver-eyed elf whispered to Daile with a conspiratorial wink. "He's much friendlier than he looks."

Daile could only nod, hoping the elf was right.

* * * * *

Evaine had forgotten just how much she liked Miltiades. The travelers found her sitting by the hearth, wrapped in a soft patchwork quilt. To her delight, Miltiades knelt before her and bowed his head.

"It is good to lay sight on you once again, fair sorceress," he intoned.

She clapped her hands together, laughing aloud for the first time since her fateful spirit journey with Shal. Momentarily, color stole back into her pale cheeks. "Nobody calls me 'fair sorceress,' Miltiades," she gently chastised the paladin.

"Then they do you a disservice, my lady," he said quite seriously.

Listle leaned close to Kern. "You know, you could probably take a few lessons in gallantry from Miltiades," she whispered.

"I'm gallant!" he whispered back defensively.

"If you say so."

There followed a great deal of catching up between old friends, as well as a fair number of introductions among new. Much to Kern's chagrin, Listle and Daile took an instant liking to each other. In moments, they were whispering and giggling, casting glances in his direction. The gods only knew what they were talking about, Kern grumped to himself. Two against one was entirely unfair.

Ren's booming laughter soon filled the sorceress's house. Like Daile, Evaine had noticed that the two years since Ciela's death had not been kind to the ranger. But the arrival of their old friend Miltiades brought some youthful animation to Ren's bearded face. For that, Evaine was grateful.

While the others talked, Sirana wandered about the wood-paneled main room, idly examining curious sculptures and old, gilt-edged books, just as any guest might. But Evaine had the peculiar feeling that Sirana's actions were not quite as offhand as they seemed. It was as if she was surveying the room, trying to calculate Evaine's power as a sorceress from the objects she possessed. Evaine decided to keep an eye on the beautiful wild mage.

However, Evaine had something more important to be concerned with for the present.

She found Kern in a small, sunlit side room.

"I figured that if I wasn't in plain view, Listle and Daile might not have such a good time talking about me," he explained a bit sheepishly.

Evaine, sitting in a chair opposite Kern, smiled. There was something unassuming yet compelling about the handsome

young man. Evaine was quiet for a moment, gathering her strength for the question she knew she had to ask.

"Tell me, Kern, how is Shal?" she said finally.

Kern swallowed hard. "Well, she's alive."

Evaine let out a deep breath of relief, closing her eyes for a moment.

"But just barely," Kern went on. "She hasn't woken, Evaine, not since that. . . journey you two undertook. I don't know what happened during the spell—I don't really even understand what it was you two were trying to do—but ever since that day, Mother just lies there, growing paler and thinner."

Evaine shook her head. That the wizard of Denlor's Tower lived still was no minor miracle and was in itself a great testament to a strong spirit. The attack of the pool's guardian had left Evaine feeling sapped of all strength. Even now, nearly a tenday later, her joints still throbbed, and dark circles lingered under her eyes. Yesterday, she had attempted to light a candle with a routine incantation and had fainted from the excruciating pain that had surged through her body.

"We are lucky Shal is still with us," Evaine said, glad for the warm winter sunlight streaming through the window-panes.

"You have a very dangerous enemy, Kern Desanea."

"I know." His shoulders slumped slightly, a troubled look crossing his broad face. "I... I hope the journey the two of you took wasn't for nothing."

"It wasn't," Evaine said firmly. "Don't think that Shal would do anything differently if she was given a second chance, Kern. She knew the risks involved when she agreed to the spirit journey, and she accepted them. Shal was prepared to live or die with the consequences of her actions." She gazed at Kern intently. "You must accept risks that are no less dangerous."

The young paladin stared at her. "I will do my best," he managed to say.

"Good," was Evaine's only reply.

Night descended swiftly this time of year, and it was already dark outside when everybody gathered around the oaken table in the comfortably cluttered main room.

"Shal and I made some important discoveries on our spirit journey," Evaine began. She clasped a mug of fragrant rose-hip tea in her hands. "First of all, whoever he may be, Kern's antagonist is not allied with the evil force that is warding Tyr's hammer in the ruins of the red tower. Instead, I think it's quite likely your enemy hopes to use you to obtain the hammer, Kern."

"Me?" Kern asked, picking at his bowl of venison stew.

"You have been ordained by Tyr to seek the hammer," Miltiades said in his reverberating voice. "And you are the only one who may lift the hammer from its hiding place. Since the attempt to abduct you failed at the temple, it seems likely this foe now intends to wait until you have acquired the relic before striking again."

Evaine sipped her tea, nodding. The paladin's reasoning made sense.

"How can you be so certain you're right?" Sirana asked the undead paladin. It was not lost on Listle that Sirana had shifted her chair closer to Kern's, so her arm brushed his slightly every time she moved. "Why wouldn't this elusive enemy try to abduct Kern again on the way to the red tower?"

"And pin his hopes on a tactic that has already failed once?" Listle asked with a bit more vitriol than intended.

"I see," was all Sirana said.

"Let's move on," Evaine said with a disapproving frown at both Sirana and Listle. "Shal and I made another discovery on our journey, one that should concern us even more. Kern's enemy has apparently allied himself with a creature guarding a magical pool in the Dragonspine Mountains. Pools contain enormous and perilous amounts of power—that's something I know about firsthand, as do Ren and

Miltiades. That means our enemy has a considerable advantage. What's more, this pool is like none I've ever encountered before. There is something very primordial about its power. I think it's quite possible that this pool is older—older by far—than the others I've destroyed."

" 'For awaiting them still is the twilight pool's shadowed guardian,'" Kern murmured. Evaine arched a single eyebrow, regarding him curiously. "It's the last line of Bane's prophecy concerning the hammer," he explained.

" 'The twilight pool,'" Evaine repeated. "Never in all my studies have I come across any mention of a pool of twilight." The sorceress shrugged. "Well, one thing seems clear enough. If you find the Hammer of Tyr, Kern, don't plan on taking a rest right away. Be ready for another attack, and a powerful one. You can be sure it will come—and when you're at your weakest."

"Thanks for the advice," Kern said with understandably little enthusiasm.

Ren had been quiet through all of this, listening carefully. Now he spoke. "Well, Daile, what do you think?" he asked as he scratched his gray-shot beard.

"About what?" she asked in puzzlement.

"About going on another journey. I think Kern here could use a bit of help." He grinned mischievously. "Unless, of course, you'd rather hurry home to repair the keep's old stone walls."

Daile smiled happily. "Let the wind blow the leaves in," she said. "Kern, if you want my company, you've got it."

"I would consider it an honor," Kern said with a grin.

Suddenly a thought struck him, his smile vanishing. "I just remembered something," he said gloomily. "The prophecy said that five are to quest for the hammer. But if both you and Ren come with us, Daile, that will make six."

"Oh," Daile said, her spirits sinking. She sighed. So much for quests, she thought.

Kern gave Miltiades a troubled look.

"I cannot resolve this for you, Kern," the paladin said solemnly. "The prophecy speaks clearly. Only five can enter the red tower in search of Tyr's hammer. However, I will say this. How I know I cannot say, but it seems right to me that both Daile and Ren should journey with us."

"It's settled then," Kern said firmly.

Daile smiled excitedly. She had her quest after all.

* * * * *

It was late when Listle sought out Evaine. The sorceress sat near the hearth, gazing into the crimson flames.

"Evaine?"

The sorceress looked up, then smiled warmly. "Listle. What is it?"

Listle sat in the chair opposite Evaine, her silvery eyes earnest. "I need to ask you something." She took a deep breath, steeling her resolve. "What do you think of Sirana? I... I don't trust her."

There! She had said it. Maybe it marked her as little more than a jealous child. But Listle couldn't help but wonder if Evaine had noticed anything strange about the wild mage.

Evaine regarded Listle thoughtfully. The elf felt suddenly uncomfortable under the sorceress's piercing gaze.

"If you fear I'll believe your suspicions are motivated by jealousy, Listle, do not worry," Evaine said finally. "The wild mage is hiding something, of that I have no doubt. She is not all that she appears. You've sensed that, as have I." Her green eyes sparkled sharply in the firelight. "But then, you understand such matters well, do you not, Listle Onopordum?"

All color drained from Listle's face. She stared at the sorceress. How could Evaine have possibly known?

"Don't be afraid, Listle," Evaine said gently. "Your secret is safe with me. But a word of advice. The longer you keep a secret, the harder it is to reveal the truth. And in the end, the truth will be known. It's inevitable. You would do well to remember that."

Listle nodded. She could find no words to reply. Evaine knew!

"And keep an eye on Sirana," Evaine added. "It's up to you to make certain she tries nothing treacherous."

"I... I will," Listle whispered. "Thank you, Evaine." Trembling, she rose and hurried from the room, turning her back to hide the tears that streamed down her cheeks.

A moment later a figure stepped from the shadows and into the firelight. Beaten steel gleamed dully. A faint coldness tinged the air, along with a dry, dusty scent.

"She has a great deal to learn," Miltiades said quietly, standing beside Evaine's chair. His metal armor made no noise as he moved.

"Give her a few years, Miltiades," Evaine replied softly. "She hasn't had much time to come to grips with her true nature." She gazed up at the paladin. "Certainly not as much time as you and I have had to accept ours."

"You're right, of course."

"I know," she said with a crooked smile.

It was strange, Evaine thought. While she knew how formidable Miltiades could be in battle, somehow she had forgotten that his demeanor could be so gentle and gracious. It seemed a bit incongruous in a skeletal warrior of fearsome aspect, but Evaine knew it was the man he had been in life that was important, not his undead appearance. In fact, when she closed her eyes and listened to Miltiades speak, it was difficult to imagine him as anything but a living, breathing man.

Yet it was a reverie that was shattered each time she gazed at the yellowed bones of his face.

"You should go to sleep," Miltiades said after a silence. "If Gamaliel discovers you are still awake, he's liable to grab you by the scruff of your neck and haul you to bed like a kitten."

"You're not kidding," she said with a wry laugh. She sighed wearily. "But I can't sleep tonight, Miltiades. I can't stop

thinking about the twilight pool and its guardian." She remembered something. "Here, I want you to have this." She pulled a small object from a pocket. It was an ornate brooch of gold, set with a single diamond-clear crystal. "I have a similar gem. These will allow us to keep in contact, no matter the distance that separates us."

Miltiades took the brooch. "I will not lose it."

"You'd better not!" Evaine said with mock severity. "These things aren't a copper piece a dozen, you know." Her face softened. "Be careful on your journey, old friend." Slowly, she reached out a hand and touched the paladin's gauntlet. She breathed in sharply, feeling sudden pain, and snatched her hand back. His gauntlet was cold! Terribly, terribly cold. It hurt just to brush it with her fingertips. She looked at the undead paladin.

Strange, she thought, that his visage could seem so tragic even though it was devoid of flesh.

"I am sorry, Evaine," he said quietly.

"No," she said firmly, her eyes as hard as jade. "Don't be sorry, Miltiades. Don't ever be sorry. We are what we are."

The skeletal man said nothing in reply.

10

A Prophecy Fulfilled

The denizens of the coffin walls rattled their bones in a mockery of laughter. Bits of broken teeth and tatters of mummified flesh rained down on Kern. The darkness of the nave hungrily swallowed the light of his holy shield. He shook his head against the dizzying stench and struggled to control the dream.

Behold, Hammerseeker! I have a gift for you.

Like moldering curtains of suffocating velvet, the darkness parted, revealing a sarcophagus fashioned of corpse-pale stone. A death mask was carved into the heavy lid, showing the likeness of a young man with blankly staring eyes. The face was Kern's. With a sound like grinding bones, the lid of the sarcophagus slowly shifted to one side.

Come, climb within, paladin of Tyr. You cannot refuse my gift. Kern steeled his will. Somehow, he had to turn the nightmare to his own advantage.

"I... I was wrong to resist you," he said dully, keeping his gaze blank. "The majesty of... of your darkness is too great." At last, you have gained wisdom, youngling. The voice in the darkness spoke with satisfaction.

"Never could I have slain you," Kern went on in a fawning voice, preparing himself for a gamble. He took a deep breath. "Never could I have come close enough to strike at your one weakness."

Weakness? the voice shrieked. Kern shuddered under the brutal force of its outrage. I am as powerful as the darkness itself. I have no weakness!

Kern bowed his head in a perfect semblance of trembling submission. "Of course, Great One! I was foolish to believe the tales I was told!"

Laughter gushed out of the nave like putrid water. Pitiful youngling! Were you told that you could simply cut the thread that binds me to my web? How terribly easy it must have sounded! Ah, how cruel are those who spoke such lies to you. Something stirred in the darkness, something with spindly, ghost-white limbs. No magic you possess could ever sever me from the source of my power, youngling.

Kern felt a surge of hope. He was certain that, in its pride, the creature had let slip an important secret. But what was it?

Enough of this, Hammerseeker! The end has come, and you have lost.

Suddenly, Kern's hopes were transformed into terror. Tentacles of shadow snaked out of the sarcophagus, coiling tightly around him. He struggled in horror, but could not break free of their stranglehold.

At last, triumph is mine!

Kern screamed as the tentacles dragged him into the cold, confining interior of the sarcophagus, pinning his limbs in

place. He couldn't move. He couldn't breathe.
The coffin lid began to slide into place....

* * * * *

This time Kern owed his life to Sirana.

He woke up gasping, the wild mage bending over him. A strange, colorless mist enclosed him.

"The hold the Hammerwarder has on your dreams grows stronger the closer we come to the red tower," Sirana said grimly. "I was barely able to break the creature's grip." With a wave of her hand, she banished the dull shroud of magic that had protected him. It seemed to leave a thin, oily residue on his skin.

For six days, the adventurers had been riding southward from Evaine's dwelling, toward the ruins of the red tower near the southwestern edge of the Moonsea. Each night, Kern had been visited by a nightmare sent by the creature guarding the hammer. And each night had been worse than the one before.

"Well, the warder won't have another night to stalk my dreams," Kern said hoarsely. "We'll reach the tower today. Thank you for your help, Sirana."

"My pleasure," the wild mage purred.

Weakly, Kern sat up. His head pounded furiously, but this time the dream had yielded a valuable secret.

"What are you grinning about?" Listle remarked as Kern sat down by the campfire. She was stirring a pot of oat porridge hanging on a tripod of green willow branches.

"The Hammerwarder sent me another nightmare last night"

Ren and Daile stopped eating. Miltiades turned his empty gaze toward Kern.

"And you're happy about that?" the elf said incredulously.

"Let me see that helmet of yours, Kern. It must be too tight. I think it's squeezed your brain out your ears."

Kern glared at the elf. "You know, you could surprise me and let me finish for a change."

Ren spoke before the young paladin could start bickering

with the elf. "Did something important happen in the dream, Kern?"

Kern ran a hand through his bright red hair, frowning. "Maybe, Uncle Ren. The Hammerwarder said something that might be important. I need to think about it for a while to be sure."

The ranger nodded, standing up. "Then let's be on our way."

The six adventurers rode southward across drab, snow-dusted plains. Several days ago, upon leaving Evaine's dwelling, Sirana had summoned and tamed a pair of shaggy wild horses with a spell. Daile and Ren rode these now. The wild horses had proved excellent mounts.

The ice-blue sky was clear. Yet despite the brilliant sunlight, the air was bitterly cool. Soon all were shivering—except for Miltiades, who seemed unaffected by the fierce cold.

It was midday when they reached the ruins of the red tower. The riders crested a low rise, reining their mounts to a halt. Before them lay a bowl-shaped valley. In its center stood the jagged stump of the tower, made of dark rock the color of dried blood. It looked almost like a gigantic tombstone, Kern thought, marking the spot where a great evil had died. Most of the tower's stones lay scattered about the valley, along with the crumbling remains of circular walls and the occasional remnants of a guard tower or outbuilding. A harsh wind blew through the vale.

"I never thought I'd lay eyes on this forsaken place again," Ren said softly.

In silence, they rode down into the valley. Kern kept a hand on the enchanted warhammer at his side. He did his best to swallow the lump in his throat. The adventurers halted among the lichen-covered boulders at the edge of the ruins, dismounting and tethering the horses. From here they would go on foot.

Listle pulled a handful of glittering dust from one of the myriad pouches hanging at her belt. "This will stick to anything magical in the ruins," she explained. "It should

help us avoid any traps. It's a good idea to avoid anything that sparkles. Unless, of course, you happen to like surprises."

She tossed the shimmering dust up into the air. As the wind caused it to swirl, the dust seemed to multiply, as if each speck had split itself in two, and each of these had split as well. The cloud of dust rose high into the sky, expanding as it did until it covered the entire ruin. Then slowly it began to drift down like fine, sparkling snow. Listle gasped.

"What is it?" Daile asked in concern.

"The dust—it's settling everywhere!" Listle exclaimed. "The entire ruin must be magic. But how can that be?" The elf sank onto a boulder, visibly shaken. The spell had drained far more of her strength than she had anticipated.

Sirana gave Listle's shoulder a patronizing squeeze. "Allow me, little sister."

I'm not your little sister! Listle thought angrily. However, she refrained from speaking, opting for a sullen glare instead.

The wild mage spread her arms wide, her snowy robe and dark hair flowing in the wind. She intoned the arcane words of a spell. Tendrils of colorless, pulsating mist rose out of the ground to creep among the fallen stones. Like ethereal serpents, the coils of mist spread throughout the ruins. Then they faded.

Sirana blinked in surprise. "The ruins are rebuilding themselves!" the wild mage exclaimed.

"What?" Ren asked in surprise.

A slight frown creased Sirana's forehead. "You may have destroyed the pool of darkness, Ren o' the Blade, but the wizard who built this tower commanded vast power. That power still infuses each of these rocks, as well as the very ground we stand upon. As we speak, slowly but surely, the tower seeks to restore itself, to rise into the sky once more and regain its former glory."

"Glory," Miltiades repeated in his eerie voice. "An interesting choice of words, Sirana."

She shrugged. "I suppose 'glory' isn't the right word, considering the great evil of the Red Wizard who built this tower. But even you, noble paladin, must admire the loyalty inherent in these stones, a loyalty that compels them to raise themselves anew long years after their master's death."

Miltiades nodded silently, but he found her words curious. The wild mage was something of a mystery to him. Most living beings radiated strong auras that revealed their true natures to the paladin. But from Sirana he sensed . . . nothing. True, he could detect nothing evil about her—unlike these ruins, which seemed to ooze evil like foul ichor. However, he could not sense any goodness in the wild mage either.

"So where do we start looking for the hammer, Kern?" Daile asked, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Down," he said, gazing at the jagged, broken tower. "Down in the darkness below."

"Then we must start by locating the stairway," Miltiades offered. "When the tower was whole, there was a vast, spiral staircase of red marble that led from a great hall down to the caverns beneath. That was where the pool of darkness lay, as well as the cavern where Phlan was imprisoned. It must lie somewhere in the heart of the ruins."

"If it hasn't been buried in the rubble," Kern added grimly.

"I think this calls for a little scouting, don't you, Daile?" Ren said.

The archer nodded at her father. "When we rode into the valley, I caught sight of the remains of a guard tower on the far side of the ruins. I bet it would give us a good vantage."

Ren grinned proudly at his daughter.

Miltiades pointed out a huge, headless statue that stood near the center of the ruins. Ren and Daile agreed to rendezvous with the others there in two hours' time. The two rangers quickly disappeared among the boulders.

Well, Kern thought, there's no use in lingering. With a deep

breath, he plunged into the ruins, Miltiades, Sirana, and Listle following.

The valley was a brooding place. The air was stifling, and the ground was as hard and cracked as if it had been fired in a furnace. Half-formed walls sketched vague, roofless rooms, and massive lintels marked doorways leading nowhere. Scabrous lichen covered the stones like a disease. Dusting everything was a fine, sparkling powder, the remnants of Listle's spell.

"You have talent, little sister," Sirana said with a pretty smile. "It is no mean feat to cast a spell covering such a large area. Now you simply need to learn how to focus your energies. But I'm certain, once you gain a little experience, you'll have no trouble."

Listle's eyes were diamond-hard. "Why, thank you, Sirana," she said frostily. She knew she shouldn't let Sirana's imperious manner get to her, but Kern was so insufferably polite to the wild mage, so deferential and gallant. Even now he nodded attentively as she walked beside him, talking softly about the gods knew what.

Probably me, Listle thought glumly.

"Are you well, Listle?" a dry voice inquired.

She barely noticed the involuntary shiver that ran up her spine. She was still getting used to Miltiades—and the chill that perpetually hovered around him.

"Do you trust her, Miltiades?" Listle asked quietly, gazing at the wild mage.

The skeletal knight was silent for a time. "Trust is like a shield," he said finally. "It has two surfaces, one facing inward and one facing outward. Without both, the shield cannot be." Miltiades seemed to smile, even though his lips had turned to dust centuries ago. "But in answer to your question, Listle, I do not know whether to trust Sirana. But she has been helpful to our quest so far, and until she acts otherwise, I will regard her as an ally, if not a friend."

"Oh," was all Listle said. His words did not ease her troubled

heart, and both of them knew it.

"Listle, take a look at this," Kern said, interrupting the elf's reverie. He and the wild mage had stopped in front of a doorway set into a high stone wall. The magic that was rebuilding the tower had accomplished much in this place. The wall was solid, curving to the right and left as far as Listle could see. A single rune was carved above the arched doorway.

Listle stood on tiptoe to study the rune. "It's not one I recognize, but I don't think it's a warning rune of any sort."

Sirana said nothing. Evidently, she agreed.

"Well, if it doesn't portend danger, I suppose there's no harm in passing through," Kern decided. He stepped into the shadowed portal, disappearing from view. Sirana followed, as did Miltiades. Listle was the last to walk through the doorway.

On the other side, the elf found herself at the end of a long, stone-walled walkway. The others were nowhere to be seen. She whirled around in surprise, only to discover that the portal had vanished. She was alone. She tried scaling the wall, but quickly ascertained that its surface was as slippery as glass.

"Kern!" she called out as loud as she could. "Miltiades!"

"Listle?" she heard a faint reply borne by the wind. It was Kern's voice. "Where is everybody? I seem to be alone in some sort of maze."

Maze? Suddenly Listle thought she understood what had happened. "It must have been a magical portal, Kern!" she shouted over the high wall. "I think it transported each of us to a different section of the maze."

Kern shouted something in reply, but the words were muffled by the wind. She shouted again, but this time there was no answer. She could only hope that Kern had heard her, and that the others had come to the same realization. There was nothing to do now but to try to find her way out of the maze. Despite her predicament, Listle had to grin. She loved

mazes.

She padded lightly down the walkway. It quickly branched, then branched again. She came up against a dead end and turned to retrace her steps. A turn left. Two right. A dead end. Left. Twice right. Dead end. She hummed as she went, sensing the maze's pattern. No, this wasn't going to be difficult at all. She only hoped the others would fare as well.

Abruptly the path she followed widened into a small, roofless room, obviously still in the process of rebuilding itself. Even as she watched, two stones atop one of the walls shifted of their own volition, closing a small chink.

Iron-banded trunks lay half-buried in the ground. Suits of rusted armor hung from the walls. And in the center of the chamber was a table laden with gold coins, strands of pearls, and brilliant gems. Listle eyed the table skeptically, tapping her chin with a finger.

"A king's ransom lying in plain view. Hmm, I don't suppose there's a magical enchantment guarding that."

She cast a quick spell. Sure enough, she sensed enough magical energy surrounding the table to fry an elephant. A fine trap for any greedy thief who might happen along.

"Good thing I'm not that greedy." Listle laughed. She searched the room until she found an innocuous wooden chest lurking in a shadowed corner. It was the least interesting-looking thing in the room—which was precisely why it was the most interesting to Listle. She knew that the best way to hide something important was to make it look as if it wasn't important at all.

No magic guarded the small chest. It wasn't even locked. Listle threw back the lid.

"Now this," she said to herself gleefully, "is the real treasure."

She gathered several objects from the chest and stuffed them into her pack. Without so much as a backward glance at the treasure-strewn table, she left the chamber.

A dozen twists and turns later, she stepped through another

portal, leaving the maze behind.

She found herself standing in front of the massive, headless statue of a wizard. The meeting place.

"Well," she said, "it looks as if I'm the first one here."

Feeling quite pleased with herself, she sat down to wait.

* * * * *

"Ah, Father, what power you must have had," Sirana exclaimed exultantly. She strolled around the circular room that had been the Red Wizard Marcus's spellcasting chamber. Arcane sigils covered the basaltic floor and walls. Bloodred sunlight streamed in through the high, narrow windows. The chamber showed no sign of decay or ruin. It was from here that the restorative powers flowed.

"Our vengeance is at hand, Father." Her voice echoed across the stones. Now, quickly, to complete her tasks. "Hoag!" she hissed, sending out a summons to the hamatula fiend. "Come to me, my black knight!"

I come, glorious mistress, the fiend's voice answered in her mind. But you must be patient. The new form you have given me chains me to this plane of existence. I can journey only so fast as my steed may travel, and though the wings you granted him speed our journey, there is much distance to cover.

"Then make it travel faster!" Sirana snarled. "You must destroy the skeletal paladin called Miltiades. He is the most powerful among the fools who have journeyed here, and the most dangerous. I will not have that vile knight desecrating my father's tower once again! Do you understand?"

I understand, my fearsome mistress, and I will obey—

Sirana broke the connection with a wave of her hand. She had no more time to waste. Hoag understood her orders. He would not dare disobey her. There was another being whom she must contact now, one more powerful than a lowly baatezu fiend.

Standing in the protective circle inscribed in the center of the chamber, she opened her mind. With all her will, she

sent forth a summons. She counted three heartbeats. Then her call was answered.

What is it you desire, sorceress? The guardian of the twilight pool spoke in her mind.

Its voice was fawning, yet so vast in power that Sirana almost buckled. She steeled her resolve. She could not show weakness to the guardian of the pool. It must never, not even for a second, doubt that it was her slave.

"I require more power," Sirana demanded. "The Hammer of Tyr is close. Very close. Soon I will hold it in my hand. But I must have the strength of the twilight pool to protect me from the force of its holy magic. Give me that strength. Now!"

As you wish, sorceress.

Sirana felt raw, crackling energy flow into her spirit. She reveled in the sensation. Her heart, her fingers, even the tips of her hair, tingled with power. It was glorious, intoxicating.

"Now, sink back into your slime, creature," she snapped when the transference was complete. The guardian meekly obeyed. Sirana hugged herself, thinking how truly delicious her revenge was going to be.

Once again, twilight-colored flecks glittered in her dark eyes, only this time they did not fade away so quickly.

* * * * *

"There, can you see it?"

Daile handed the long, cylindrical scrying glass to her father. They stood on the rampart of the crumbling guard tower, looking out over the ruins. Ren lifted the glass to his eye.

He nodded. "It's the entrance to the stairwell. I remember those crimson marble steps well." He smiled broadly. "Good work, Daile."

"Glad you agree," she beamed smugly.

"You know, modesty was one of your mother's most becoming traits."

Daile smiled winningly. "Well, then, I suppose I'm just my father's daughter."

Ren laughed gruffly, squeezing her shoulder. He couldn't argue with that.

Daile took the scrying glass, peering through it again. She could see the head of the stairwell in the center of some half-formed chamber, close to the huge statue where in an hour they were supposed to meet the others. Spindly vaults gave the chamber a vaguely cathedral-like aspect. Dozens of stone sarcophagi lined its perimeter.

Daile was about to lower the glass when movement caught her eye. She watched as a mule deer bounded into the open-air room. It was the first sign of life she had noticed in the ruins. The deer wandered through the hall. Clearly the poor beast was lost, separated from its herd. The animal ventured close to one of the stone sarcophagi standing upright along the edge of the chamber. What happened next made Daile gasp in horror.

As the deer passed by, the lid of the sarcophagus flew open. A half-dozen long, skeletal arms reached out, clutching at the animal. The deer thrashed wildly, eyes rolling in terror, but the skeletal arms dragged the little mule deer into the coffin. Abruptly the lid slammed shut. The hall was still once again.

Daile lowered the scrying glass, trembling.

"Daile, what is it?" Ren gripped her shaking hands. "You look as if you've just seen a ghost."

She swallowed hard. "Actually, I think it was something worse."

She described what she had seen. Ren's face was grim.

"Kern and the others are in terrible danger, Daile. That hall is near where they'll be waiting for us. If they happen to wander by those sarcophagi..."

Father and daughter dashed down the guard tower's rickety stairs. They started off at a run, picking their way through the chaos of crumbling walls and piles of stone.

They had gone only a short way when a shadow blotted out the sun.

Daile looked up, her heart freezing in her chest. A winged, jet black stallion swooped down toward her and Ren, snorting fire from its nostrils. An armored knight sat astride its back, aiming a steel-tipped lance at Ren.

Daile and Ren barely had time to throw themselves to the ground as the knight bore down on them. The stallion's wings sent dust devils whirling wildly as the knight's lance dug a deep furrow in the earth mere inches from Ren's head. Then the armored rider pulled hard on the reins. The stallion soared into the sky once more, then whirled, ready to dive again.

Daile did not hesitate. She leaped to her feet, lifting her bow and loosing a red-feathered arrow in one swift motion. The arrow streaked through the air, plunging up to its fetching into the winged horse's chest. The night stallion let out a death scream. The arrow had pierced its heart. The beast's wings crumpled limply as it plummeted to the ground, trailing its flailing rider by the reins.

The night stallion burst into flames as it struck the ground, black, greasy smoke billowing up from the mass of ruined flesh and bone. The black knight crashed into a pile of jagged stones nearby, his lance splintering, dark armor caving in all along one side of his body. He lay still.

Ren nodded grimly at Daile as she lowered her bow. "That was a good shot—"

He halted.

Slowly, the black knight pulled himself to his feet. Daile and Ren stared in astonishment. How, by all the gods, could he have survived that fall? Armor creaking, the knight took a step toward the two rangers, then another, and another. As he moved, his dark plate mail began to groan and bend. With a ringing pop, a large dent unbent itself. The knight's armor was regenerating! Quickly, Daile loosed two arrows in quick succession, but both bounced harmlessly off the armored knight's mail. Ren stood protectively in front of her.

"What do you want of us?" he growled fiercely.

The knight halted a scant ten paces away. "To kill you," he spoke in a strangely hissing voice. His armor became whole and gleaming once again. "I have been ordered to slay a vile paladin raised from the grave. But I will destroy any vermin in my path. That includes both of you." With a fluid motion, the knight drew a bastard sword as darkly polished as obsidian.

"No," Ren said, stepping forward. Damn, but he was getting too old for this nonsense. "Let your argument be with me alone. I offer you a challenge of single combat, knight."

"Father!" Daile cried desperately.

"Quiet, Daile."

The knight nodded. "Very well," he rasped. "But it will be to the death, ranger."

"So be it."

The knight waved a black gauntlet, and suddenly three smoky bands encircled Daile, pinning her arms to her waist so she couldn't move.

"To ensure our duel will be uninterrupted," the black knight explained.

Ren gave Daile a reassuring look, then he turned to face the knight, unsheathing his two-handed sword. There was no more preamble. The two warriors circled around each other warily. There was nothing Daile could do but watch.

Each of the warriors made a few preliminary feints and slashes, testing the other's reflexes, probing for weaknesses. Suddenly the black knight swung his blade high. Ren met it with his own sword. Sparks flew. Then the two whirled around, circling again. Swords clashed again, and again.

Ren feigned a stumble as he parried, and his foe took the bait. The black knight lunged forward with a killing blow. Quickly, Ren regained his balance, spinning inside his enemy's guard. As he did, he transferred his sword to one hand and reached into his boot for the dagger called Left. He brought the dagger up in a swift thrust, slipping it through the gap between two steel plates and thrusting it up into the

knight's shoulder. The black knight screamed in fury. With unnatural strength, he hurled Ren backward. The ranger flew through the air and hit the ground with a grunt of pain, his sword flying from his grip.

He was definitely getting too old for this nonsense.

"You have made me angry, human," the knight hissed venomously. "You will regret that mistake." Suddenly the knight's form began to undulate. Smooth armor transformed into scaly hide. Countless barbed spikes sprouted into being. In heartbeats, the black knight was gone. In his place stood a long-limbed fiend, its muzzle wrinkled into a rictus, displaying a mouthful of teeth sharp as broken glass.

Ren scrambled to his feet, calling the dagger Left back to his hand with a mental command. As it pulled free of the monster, black ichor gushed from the wound. The fiend shrieked.

"No one has ever caused me such pain! You will die for that, human." The fiend extended long dark talons. "Die!" It lunged toward the ranger.

Ren cast a quick glance at Daile. Her face was white with fear. He swallowed hard, and thrust both of his magical daggers, Right and Left, before him, bracing his arms. The fiend careened into the ranger, gripping him with its spine-covered arms.

The fiend crushed Ren with its embrace, driving its barbs deep into the man's flesh. How glorious, how satisfying it was, to squeeze the life out of the wretched human. Then, strangely, the fiend felt its fatal embrace weakening. The strength was siphoned from its arms. Gradually, realization dawned. The fiend looked down to spot the two enchanted daggers buried deep in its body. It felt the ichor that was its lifeblood gushing from its wounds.

Hoag stumbled backward. "Mistress, save me!" the monster shrieked in anguish. There was no reply.

The creature toppled to the ground, dead. In moments its body dissolved into a foul, steaming puddle of black liquid.

"Father!" Daile cried as the magical bonds imprisoning her vanished. She rushed to the fallen ranger, kneeling beside him. His face was pale, and he was bleeding from numerous gouges made by the fiend's spiked hide.

"Daile." Ren smiled weakly. "I'm afraid you'll have to journey on without me. The prophecy ..." He winced in pain. "The prophecy was right. Only five will enter the red tower after all."

"No, Father ..." She shook her head softly. Words caught in her throat.

He squeezed her hand. "Take Right and Left, Daile. They're yours now, along with the bow. But there's something I need to tell you about that bow, something I didn't say when I gave it to you. It's ..." A fit of coughing wracked the ranger's broken body.

"Quiet," Daile whispered, smoothing his graying red-gold hair from his brow.

He gazed at her, smiling. "Did I ever tell you how much you look like your mother?" he asked softly.

Before she could answer, his eyes went dim. He was gone.

She left his body in the shade of a nearby aspen grove. Aspens were the tree most beloved by elves, and she knew their special nature would keep Ren's body from harm until she could return. She wiped the tears from her cheeks, quelling the ache in her heart. There would be time for mourning later. Right now her friends were in danger.

She slipped Right and Left into her boots and, slinging her bow over her shoulder, started off at a run toward the heart of the ruins.

* * * * *

Kern was the last one out of the maze.

"It wasn't my fault!" he protested to a sniggering Listle. "The walls kept moving on me. I'm certain of it."

"Whatever you say, Kern."

Before Kern could argue his case further, Miltiades approached. Though it was difficult to say the skeletal

paladin was excited, there did seem to be an unusual eagerness to his perpetual grin.

"What is it, Miltiades?" Kern asked.

"I've found the stairwell."

Moments later the four adventurers were exploring the half-formed hall where the stairwell was located. There wasn't much to see besides the rows of stone sarcophagi lining the perimeter. The coffins stood upright, their frozen death masks staring blankly ahead. Listle and Sirana were both weaving spells, trying to detect any dangerous magic that might be guarding the stairwell.

"I don't think there are any traps," Listle announced finally, though her tone was less than certain.

"My, that's reassuring," Kern snorted.

Listle glared at him. "Well, there is one way we can know for certain if there are."

"What's that?"

"You stand over here, Kern." Listle smiled sweetly. "I'll just push you down the stairs, then we'll see what happens."

Kern nodded absently. He wasn't really listening to the elf. He found himself shivering. "Do you notice anything strange about those sarcophagi?" he asked the others. "I suppose it's just my imagination, but their eyes seem to be following me."

"Do you think yourself so worthy of attention, then?" Sirana asked with a sultry laugh.

He blushed. "Of course not. Like I said, it's probably just my imagination. Still..."

"Let us examine one to be sure," Miltiades said. He moved toward the standing sarcophagi. Kern, Listle, and Sirana followed. "Perhaps there is some trick about these—"

"Miltiades, get back!"

The four spun around to see Daile dash into the cathedral, eyes panicked.

"Everybody, get away from those sarcoph—"

She was too late.

Suddenly the lids of four sarcophagi sprang open with a groan. Dozens of skeletal hands reached out with uncanny swiftness, clutching at the four adventurers, who struggled in vain.

"Daile, what's happening?" Kern shouted in terror. He had the horrifying sensation that he was reliving a dream.

"Let him go!" the young ranger screamed, using the dagger called Right to hack at the arms that clutched Kern. It was to no avail. Another sarcophagus opened. Long, spindly limbs sprang out to engulf Daile. The skeletal arms inexorably dragged the adventurers into the waiting shadows of the five sarcophagi. Then the stone lids slammed shut, cutting off their cries of protest.

The half-formed cathedral was silent once again.

11

Road Into Danger

The day after Kern and his companions set off for the ruins of the red tower, Evaine decided it was time to embark on a mission of her own.

She rose in the cold of predawn and, teeth chattering, hastily donned thick woolen breeches and a tunic of her favorite mossy green. Deftly, she bound her long chestnut hair into a braid, winding it in a tight knot at the nape of her neck. As she did, she caught a glimpse of her reflection in a teardrop-shaped mirror. A gaunt, ghostly pale face with deep, shadowed eyes peered back at her. She still bore the scars of her astral battle with the guardian of the twilight pool, but she had waited as long as she dared —too long perhaps. She would just have to be strong enough.

From the tiny pocket dimension that served as her spellcasting chamber, she gathered the ingredients she would require to work her spells: many-colored crystals, iridescent powders, and small, neatly folded parchment packets filled with herbs. These she placed in a small pack, adding her copper brazier and—carefully wrapped in oiled leather—her spellbook. She remembered to grab a golden

brooch set with a single ice-clear jewel, the twin to the magical gem she had given Miltiades. This she pinned to her tunic.

A quick look around told her she had forgotten nothing. She descended the glowing spiral staircase into the warm main room of her log-walled dwelling. Gamaliel was waiting for her. The great cat sat before the fire, tail wrapped around his paws. His eyes were narrow, green-gold slits.

Please tell me you're not doing what I think you're doing, Evaine, the cat growled in the sorceress's mind.

"As you like, Gam," she murmured pleasantly. Inwardly she steeled herself for an argument.

In case you haven't noticed, I'm not laughing.

"Don't blame me if you have a poor sense of humor," Evaine replied flippantly. She banished the shimmering stairway with a snap of her fingers.

Gamaliel's whiskers twitched in agitation. You aren't well enough to travel, Evaine, let alone cast your detection spells—or face the guardian of the pool of twilight.

Evaine knelt beside her familiar. "Gam, I could tell you that I'm fine," she said solemnly. "I could tell you that I'm as strong as I've ever been. But that would be a lie. I've never lied to you, Gamaliel, and I don't intend to start now." She sighed, her heart heavy. "You may be right, of course. I may be in grave peril if I try to confront the guardian of the twilight pool in my current state. But years ago I vowed never to rest while there was a pool yet to be destroyed, and ever since then I've tried to abide by that oath. I can't betray my vow, Gam. What good would I be if I did?"

The great cat regarded her silently for a long moment, his green-gold eyes glowing.

Don't you have some more things to pack? he said at last.

The sorceress laughed, feeling better than she had in a long while. "That I do." A slight frown touched her lips. "Wait a minute," she said with gentle indignation. "Who's the master here, anyway?"

Gamaliel did not reply, so Evaine decided not to press the question. After all, she decided, she might not care for the answer.

She briskly gathered some other items. Fire she could call up with a spell, and most of the food required the land—and Gamaliel's hunting abilities—would provide. She placed a few extra clothes and some hardtack in a magical sack that grew no heavier despite its contents, such being the useful nature of its enchantment. She belted a knife forged of sharp dwarven steel at her hip and donned her heavy sheepskin coat. Hefting her small pack, she grinned at Gamaliel.

"Ready?"

Of course. Unlike you humans, cats do not need to pack before they can begin a journey. Our coats and weapons come permanently attached. He extended his razor-sharp claws for emphasis. It's much more convenient that way.

Being a practical-minded woman, Evaine had to agree.

Leaving the snug house behind, they set off northward. Bare winter branches stood out against the rose-colored morning sky, tracing dark shapes in the air like a jumble of arcane runes. Evaine and Gamaliel quickly fell into their accustomed traveling habits. The great cat loped soundlessly ahead, scouting the terrain for danger, while the sorceress kept her eyes open for any interesting herbs or bushes. Though most plants of magical use were dormant in winter, there were a few of value that could be gathered at this time of year. Into Evaine's pouches went juniper berries, holly leaves, and snowheart blooms. These last were rare crimson flowers that grew only beneath a shroud of newly fallen snow.

Come dusk, Evaine was thoroughly exhausted. Her joints felt stiff and cold despite her heavy coat. Yet the day had gone more smoothly than she might have expected. She and Gamaliel had made good time, putting nearly a half-dozen leagues behind them. The fresh air and exercise seemed to

invigorate her. Her cheeks showed patches of pink where shadows had gathered only that morning.

Deciding it would be safe to leave the sorceress unattended for a short while, Gamaliel bounded off between the trees into the fading purple twilight. Evaine busied herself setting up their camp beneath the sheltering boughs of an ancient fir tree. She laid a pile of dried wood inside a ring of stones, debating whether she should ignite it with a spell or by more mundane methods. Several days had passed since her candle-lighting incantation had caused searing pain, and that incident was still fresh in her mind. However, she would have no choice but to cast far more potent magics in the days ahead.

"There's no point in putting it off any longer, Evaine," she muttered to herself.

She took a deep breath, then began reciting the spell, fashioning intricate but long-familiar gestures with strong, large-knuckled hands. The final word of the spell hung on the air like the tone of a bell. As it faded, Evaine felt a sudden rush of heat. Panic clutched her heart, but a moment later she found herself laughing.

"Next time, don't sit so close to the fire, silly," she chided herself. She let out a sigh of relief. The spell had worked. And there had been no surge of pain. It was a small victory, but a victory nonetheless.

A shadow stole into the circle of flickering firelight, green-gold eyes flashing.

Care for some supper? the magical cat inquired, dropping two sleek, silvery shapes into Evaine's lap.

"Fish," she noted, picking up the two big rainbow trout "My, what a surprise."

Don't look a gift fish in the mouth, Evaine.

She laughed, pulling out her knife to clean the fish. "I wouldn't dream of it."

* * * * *

It was midmorning two days later when they arrived at their

destination.

The standing stone rested in the middle of a small clearing, atop a low circular mound littered with frost-painted leaves. It was a rough, irregular slab of black porphyry, about the height of a man. Spiraling, mazelike symbols were carved into the stone's surface, though their meanings were beyond Evaine's ken. The stone seemed not to have weathered much in the ninety years since she had last set foot in this clearing. She did not know whether to find that remarkable or disturbing.

She settled for interesting. She needed to remember an incantation she had heard only once before, spoken by her first master almost a century ago, in a long-dead language whose name she had never known. Evaine forced a grin. The uncertainties were what made life worth living, she reminded herself.

What is this place? Gamaliel's thoughts spoke in her mind. The great cat stalked warily around the base of the mound, whiskers twitching. There is magic here. Old magic. I can smell it on the air.

Evaine nodded as she rummaged through her pack, assembling the items she would need. "This is a very ancient place, Gam. Only a handful of these standing stones remain, scattered about Faerun. No one is certain who built them, or even what sort of people they might have been. But one thing is certain. They were powerful magicians. I doubt there are any alive today who could forge a stone such as this."

I imagine you might, if you put your mind to it.

Evaine scratched the cat's ears affectionately. "Now I remember why I like you so much," she laughed.

Gamaliel closed his eyes in pleasure. How could you have forgotten?

The sun was high overhead in the pale winter sky by the time Evaine had everything prepared for the spell. As she and Gamaliel ascended the mound, the midday light seemed to grow curiously dim. Soon it proved difficult to see

anything but the rough black stone that loomed before them.

"Here, Gam, hold this in your left hand."

The cat winked his eyes in mild annoyance. His form blurred. A moment later the barbarian stood next to the sorceress.

"That assumes I have a hand to hold things with, Evaine," Gamaliel rumbled.

"Which now you do," Evaine replied smoothly. She pressed a single, dark green leaf into his hand. She placed a similar leaf into a small hollow carved in the side of the stone. Next she used a glistening powder of crushed crystal to trace a large spiral incised in the center of the stone. Finally she scattered the crimson petals of a dozen snow-heart blooms. A faint, delicately sweet fragrance rose from them. Evaine took a deep breath. Facing Gamaliel, she reached out and tightly gripped his right hand.

"Now, don't let go of my hand, Gam, not for anything. And I mean anything. All right?"

He nodded. "As you wish."

Evaine swallowed hard, closing her eyes. She had spent the last three days trying to recall the long-forgotten words. It had not been easy, and she couldn't be certain she had remembered them all, or even that she had remembered their correct pronunciation. She tried not to think of the consequences if she made a mistake with even a single word. At the least, the spell would simply fail. At the worst, she and Gamaliel would discover what it felt like to be turned inside out.

She began the incantation.

Strangely fluid, almost inhuman-sounding words rose and fell in a trilling cascade. The queer syllables were even harder to enunciate than Evaine had imagined. In moments her throat was aching, her lips numb. She ignored the dull sensations. Once begun, the incantation had to be finished. Only once, for a single, terrifying moment, did she falter. The strange, meaningless words seemed to fly from her mind as

she lost her place. Panicking, she could feel her concentration slipping. She couldn't remember the spell!

Suddenly she felt a reassuring pressure against her right hand and a calming presence invade her mind. It spoke no words, but instead filled her with a feeling of confidence. She drew in a shuddering breath, feeling her panic recede. The words of magic tumbled from her lips once again. She sent a mental message of gratitude to Gamaliel.

She spoke the last word of the spell. Suddenly the whole world went black.

The clearing was gone, as well as the sky above. The only sensation was a blast of cruel, bone-numbing cold. It felt as if all her flesh were being stripped away, leaving only her bones, bare and exposed to the malevolent chill. And yet, faintly, almost imperceptibly, she sensed a warmth in her hand and held on tightly.

Forms rushed out of the darkness.

Had Evaine's tongue not been frozen solid, she would have screamed. They were monstrous: leprous, malformed bodies glowing with putrescent yellow light, with rotting, wart-covered flesh dripping off spindly limbs in quivering chunks, and bulbous, fly-covered eyes staring at her mindlessly. The abominable creatures grinned, teeth gnashing like shards of broken glass, the expressions devoid of any emotion save ravenous hunger. Evaine shuddered in revulsion.

She felt the grip on her right hand loosening. Gamaliel! He was going to reach for his sword. But he dare not!

She clamped her fingers down hard.

No, Gamaliel! she shouted in her mind. You promised you would not let go of my hand!

She felt the hesitation, the indecision. The swarm of misshapen monsters came closer, long purple tongues dripping foul yellow spittle. For a terrifying moment she felt no response from Gamaliel. Then the grip on her hand tightened once again.

The tide of abominations streaked by. The din of their

jabbering was deafening, the festering stench they exuded stupefying. They writhed as they passed, their many-jointed arms undulating, their shard-teeth flashing.

But they did not so much as brush up against Evaine and Gamaliel. Who the denizens of this nameless dimension were, Evaine did not know. But the success of the spell meant that as long as she and Gamaliel raised no hand against them, the beasts would leave the two interlopers alone.

The last lurching stragglers hobbled by, their limbs more stunted than the others, their flesh even more soft and bubbling. Then the hideous things were gone, and Evaine and Gamaliel were alone in the frigid darkness.

A heartbeat later that darkness shattered.

A new, bitter cold blasted Evaine. Tiny, stinging particles of snow bit into her cheeks. Before her, half-buried in snow, was another standing stone of roughly hewn black porphyry.

"Where are we?" Gamaliel shouted above the roar of the wind.

Evaine gazed at the land around her. They stood on a jagged needle of granite. Snow-covered slopes angled down in all directions into a sea of blinding white, surrounded by a rocky wall that seemed to reach all the way up to the hard blue sky.

Despite the cold, Evaine felt a surge of elation.

"The Dragonspine Mountains!" she shouted triumphantly.

* * * * *

Evaine wearily dusted the powdery remnants of crystal from her coat and tunic.

"It's no use, Gam. The mountains seem to be interfering with my locating spell. The peaks are too rich in iron ore. They're affecting my spell like a magnet affects a compass."

She warmed her hands above the small flame dancing inside the copper brazier she had used to work her magic. The cold was not so unbearable here in the shelter of the pine forest. She and Gamaliel had quickly descended from the sharp,

windswept peak where the standing stone had transported them, moving below the timberline and into the vast, silent stands of fir and pine that blanketed the slopes of the mountain. Fine, granular snow dusted the needle-strewn ground among the trees, and the branches above shielded them from the fury of the wind.

It had taken most of the afternoon for Evaine to cast her locating spell, and by now evening was drawing near.

"Can you sense the pool at all?" Gamaliel asked, crouching down beside the sorceress. The leather fringe of his coat traced fine parallel lines in the snow.

"A little. Enough to get a general sense of its direction from here. But I can't tell for certain how far away it is." She pulled a rolled sheepskin from her pack and smoothed it out before her. Inside was a crackling sheet of parchment, the map she had created with the help of Ren o' the Blade.

She spoke a word of magic, and the map began to glow brightly. Shapes rose from the parchment, all in perfect, miniature imitation of the surrounding landscape. Tiny crags appeared on the map, and silvery hairline rivers, and deep green forests as soft-looking as moss. In a moment, the entire range of the Dragonspine Mountains lay spread out on the ground before Evaine in brilliant magical detail. It was a view such as an eagle might see, soaring high above the world where the air was thin and sharp. A small, green glowing spark showed the exact spot where Evaine and Gamaliel now paused, in the center of a small valley at the western end of the mountains.

"My feeling is the pool lies eastward," Evaine said, tracing along the map with a finger.

"Toward the heart of the mountains," Gamaliel added tersely. The sorceress nodded. "We can journey over this pass, into the next valley, and up the far slope. I'll cast my locating spell again there. The closer we draw to the pool, the better I should be able to pinpoint its location."

She gathered up her brazier and other spell components,

and the two set off into the fading light. A quarter hour later, Gamaliel spotted a small, dark opening in a weathered outcrop of granite. A few minutes of cautious inspection revealed a low circular cave with a dry sandy floor. A few broken bones lay scattered about—evidence of past denizens—but these were ancient by the look of them.

Gamaliel discovered several small, strangely smooth stone disks near the back of the cave. They seemed to be fashioned of the same granite as the cave's walls. Curious, Evaine took one of the disks to examine, but it was without mark or carving. If it had been made by human hands, she didn't know for what purpose. With a shrug, she tossed the disk back to the floor.

Soon Evaine had a fire burning in the center of the cave, driving away the chill. Minutes later, Gamaliel padded through the cave's entrance, a huge snowshoe hare in his mouth.

"What, no fish?" Evaine asked in mock surprise.

The rivers are all frozen. This will simply have to do.

"I'll try to make the best of it."

After feasting on roasted rabbit, Evaine took out her spellbook, committing a few magical incantations to memory, for each time she used a spell it was forgotten, and she was obliged to study it anew. Soon her attention wavered, and she found herself staring into the shadows cast by the fire.

Gamaliel watched her intently, head resting on his paws. That strange look of sorrow, so common of late, had stolen into her eyes again. Even as he watched, she absently lifted a hand to the gold and crystal brooch pinned to her tunic. Gamaliel wrinkled his nose. Why was it that a wizard who was so intelligent with regard to everything else could not see this one simple truth?

She was lonely.

Long ago, in the first life she had lived, magic had been all that Evaine had cared about. And these last decades, her life

had been consumed by her quest to destroy the pools of magic. Even a magical creature like Gamaliel could sense that was not fulfilling enough. The worst of it was that Gamaliel realized he could do nothing about her melancholy. But no, that wasn't true, he told himself suddenly. He extended his claws nervously. He could try one more thing. Suddenly Evaine felt a warm touch against her cheek. She looked up in surprise. Then she smiled. "Gamaliel, you startled me. But then, I suppose you think it's funny to see me jump like a toad. Go on, admit it."

Her familiar knelt beside her. Curiously, Evaine noted, he had donned his human guise once again.

"Evaine." The intentness with which he spoke the word drew her gaze into his.

"What is it, Gam?" she asked softly, a bit bemused by his unusual behavior.

He paused, the firelight dancing across his sharp, handsome features. He drew in a deep breath. "Evaine, do you love me?"

She laughed. "Let me guess—you want your tummy rubbed?"

"No, Evaine." His seriousness surprised her anew. She fell silent as he gripped both her hands in his. "That isn't what I meant. What I wish to say is..." He struggled with the words. "... is that there is a way for me to become... to become human. Truly human. Forever. There is a magic you could weave."

Evaine shook her head in confusion. "But why in the world would you wish to be permanently human?"

Slowly he lifted her hands, pressing his lips gently to their palms. "I would do it for you, Evaine. To end your loneliness. To make you happy."

Evaine stared at her old friend in wonderment as the full meaning of his words finally dawned upon her. "You would ... you would give up everything that you adore, everything that you are, just to be with me?"

He nodded gravely.

"Oh, Gamaliel!" Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"I have troubled you," he said dejectedly. "You do not wish to have me for your life-mate."

She shook her head, trying to find the words. Couldn't he guess? Her tears were not of sorrow, but of happiness. She encircled the barbarian man with her arms, embracing him fiercely.

"It's not that, Gam!" she finally managed to say. "Yes, I do love you. More than anything in all the world. But..." She pushed the barbarian's shoulders back so she could look him in the eyes. "I love you for who you are, Gamaliel. I don't ever want you to change. I need you to be there, to prowl beside me on my journeys, to protect me when I cast my spells, to watch over me at night—and to find fish for me when I'm hungry." She brushed his cheek warmly. "There's one thing you should know, Gam. Even if I'm unhappy sometimes, never once since the day I met you have I ever been lonely."

Heart brimming, she leaned forward and softly kissed the barbarian. He regarded her fondly. Then his form shimmered, and the lithe great cat sat before her.

I knew it all along. You do like fish!

She hugged him tightly.

Later, when Evaine had fallen asleep, Gamaliel curled up by the fire, regarding her still form through the thin slits of his green eyes. He felt a deep relief. Though he would have done anything for Evaine, it would have been hard to live his life forever as a man. No claws, small, useless teeth, annoyingly slow and lumbering legs—how boring to be eternally human!

And yet, deep in his chest, Gamaliel felt just the slightest twinge of something that felt like ... regret?

* * * * *

It was midnight.

Evaine lay deep in slumber near the embers of the fire, her

long chestnut hair tousled across the cloak she had folded for a pillow. Gamaliel sat stiff and silent at the cave's entrance, gazing tirelessly into the night, keeping watch.

Deep in the cave, a small circle glowing a faint crimson suddenly appeared on the granite wall. The circle flashed, and abruptly a disk of stone fell out of the wall like a cork knocked out of a bottle. A small, furry shape scurried silently out of the hole.

A rock rat.

Shy and mysterious, rock rats were small, mousy creatures with the peculiar ability to burrow through solid stone. In truth, the creatures were magical in nature. Legend told how once long ago a greedy wizard was transformed into a pack rat by an angry enchantress he had swindled. The wizard fled into the mountains to live a life befitting a rat. But ever after, his descendants retained a bit of his magic—and a touch of his greedy nature as well. From that day on, the rock rats had riddled the mountains with their burrows, pilfering any bright baubles or pretty stones they happened upon, squirreling them away to their dens.

This rock rat was no exception to its kind.

Without a sound, the long-whiskered rat scurried across the soft sandy floor of the cave. Attracted by the glowing coals of the fire, it approached Evaine's sleeping form. Suddenly its dark eyes glimmered excitedly. It had caught sight of the glittering brooch pinned to the sorceress's tunic—the gem of communication. The rock rat had never seen anything so shiny in all its life. Its nose twitched furiously.

Swiftly, the rat gnawed with its sharp teeth through the fabric of Evaine's tunic. In moments the brooch was free. Gripping the gem in its mouth, the rock rat scurried back to the small hole in the wall. Focused as he was on the night outside, Gamaliel never noticed the little rodent's theft.

Chittering gleefully to itself, the rock rat padded through a labyrinth of small tunnels toward its den, gripping its treasure tightly. One of the tunnels opened onto a narrow

stone ledge, high on the sheer face of a cliff. The rock rat hurried along the rim.

It never even saw the snowy owl that swooped down like a ghost out of the night sky.

The owl reached for the little animal with sharp talons. The rock rat let out one squeak of terror, and the glittering brooch fell spinning into the emptiness below and was gone. But somehow the little creature managed to wriggle free of the bird's grasp. The owl screeched angrily as the rat scrambled into the sanctuary of its burrow. The snowy bird whirled above the ledge, sensing its quarry was lost. It screeched once more and winged away into the night.

The rock rat cowered in the darkness of its burrow until the owl was lost in the gloom. Finally the small creature let out a soft, sad chitter, then scurried down the tunnel toward its warm, familiar den.

Far below, on a small spur of stone jutting out from the cliff face, the gem of communication glittered in the light of the rising moon.

12

Dark Destiny

Consciousness came with crushing pain.

Kern's breaths were shallow, burning gasps. He couldn't seem to move his arms or legs. The darkness was suffocating.

"I must be dreaming again," he whispered hoarsely.

"It is no dream, Kern," an eerie voice spoke in the gloom.

Kern sighed in relief. "Miltiades... where are we?"

"In this darkness, who can say?" the undead paladin replied from somewhere nearby.

"Then let's cast a little light on the subject," a familiarly flippant voice added. "Zarjia!" Pale silver light broke through the darkness.

"Maybe casting a light spell wasn't such a good idea after all," Listle remarked bleakly as her eyes surveyed the scene.

"Sometimes things look better in the dark."

The five adventurers were being held captive in a catacomb of some sort. Yellowed bone lashed together with dried sinew bonded them to five shallow stone alcoves. Kern craned his head to see Daile and Miltiades to his left, struggling in vain against the skeletal bonds. Listle and Sirana were pinned tightly to his right. Kern tried to move his arms, but the scabrous bones only tightened cruelly. They were trapped.

"I have a feeling we aren't the first guests ever to visit this enchanting place," Listle observed with a gulp.

Kern saw that more alcoves lined the catacomb's walls in either direction. Many were occupied. A mummified owlbear opened its maw in an endless scream, and several decomposing hobgoblins clawed at their bonds, shriveled faces twisted into masks of horror.

The elf, face pale, chewed her lip. "And something tells me that getting in is a whole lot easier than getting out."

"Sirana, can you cast a spell that might free us?" Kern asked the wild mage.

She shook her head. "Not if I can't move my hands." Her dark eyes flashed in frustration. "Powerful magic requires intricate gestures. I can't simply wiggle my ears and teleport us out of here."

An idea struck Kern. "Listle, couldn't you simply pass right through your bonds? You do it with walls all the time."

"I already thought of that, Kern. Unfortunately, I can only pass through inanimate objects." Listle grimaced as the skeletal arms tightened their hold on her. "And these things are definitely not inanimate."

"Perhaps you should not focus on your bonds, Listle," Miltiades suggested.

Her small, elven nose wrinkled. "Wait a minute. I understand! The bones holding me may be animate, but the stones aren't." Her ruby pendant flared brightly. Without warning the elf sank backward into the stone wall of the alcove. Long moments passed.

Abruptly, Listle stepped out of a basaltic column carved with

twisted gargoyles.

"Ugh!" She said disgustedly. "That was definitely not pleasant! You really wouldn't believe the stuff that accumulates behind walls in places like this." She hastily brushed bits of dried cobweb and ancient grime from her green tunic. "Now, let me see what I can do about these uncooperative bones, Kern."

However, try as she might, none of Listle's spells and no amount of tugging could break the scabrous bonds.

"All right, Kern, there's one last thing I can try." Listle took a deep breath. "I was hoping it wouldn't come to this, but I don't think I have much choice."

"Listle, what in the world are you talking about?" Kern asked in exasperation.

"Just hold on tight. And whatever you do, don't let go."

Her ruby necklace glowing, Listle disappeared into the floor. Kern wondered what the unpredictable elf was up to. Moments later, he found out as two slender hands reached out of the stones behind him and jerked him backward—right through the solid surface of the wall!

It was far worse than any nightmare. Kern could feel the rock passing through his body with a hideous, slithering sensation. Solid stone filled his heart and lungs, almost choking him. It was horrible. After what seemed an eternity, Listle hauled him up through the catacomb's floor. He gasped for breath. The others stared in surprise.

"Next time just let me starve to death, Listle," Kern said, shuddering in revulsion. "It couldn't be any worse than that." He hauled himself to his feet as the elf slumped weakly against a column, her face alarmingly pale.

"Listle, are you all right?" Miltiades asked in concern.

She nodded. "I'm fine. Really."

"Are you sure?" Kern asked. He reached out to grip the elf's shoulder, but his fingers passed right through her.

"I said I'm fine!" Listle snapped, stumbling away from him.

"Do you hear me? Now why don't you see to the others with

that precious hammer of yours?" She retreated into the shadows.

Kern gaped at his hand. Had it simply been his imagination? He wondered if the others had seen what he had seen. But no, he realized, his body blocked their view.

Shaking his head, he turned his attention to his companions. One blow of Primul's enchanted warhammer was all it took to shatter the skeletal bonds. In moments, Daile, Miltiades, and Sirana were free. Listle stepped from the shadows to rejoin them.

It was only then, as they all stood together, that Kern realized one of the companions was missing. He had been so preoccupied with their predicament that he had not noticed until now.

"Daile," he asked the young ranger with a frown, "where is Ren?"

The look in her eyes made his heart stop. He watched her with growing dread.

Daile swallowed hard, stumbling over the words. Her voice was bleak. "We were attacked by a fiend outside the guard tower," she finally managed to say, her voice trembling. "He slew it, but it... it..." She drew a ragged breath. "My father is dead," she said quietly. "Ren o' the Blade is dead."

Miltiades hung his head. "Then this day Faerun has become a darker place indeed."

* * * * *

"Now where to?" Daile asked, sticking a pair of arrows into her leather belt.

Not a quarter hour before, Daile had broken down in tears as she told the story of her father's death. Now a cold light shone in her eyes, and there was a grim set to her jaw.

"This way," Kern said, pointing in one direction. He wasn't sure how to get out of the catacomb, but it was almost as if he heard a faint trilling in his mind, showing him the way.

"You hear the voice of Tyr's hammer, don't you?" Miltiades asked him softly.

"I... I think so, Miltiades." Kern cocked his ear, listening closely. The trilling had grown slightly louder.

The undead paladin nodded. "Your destiny calls you, Hammerseeker."

Kern led the way into a long, roughly hewn corridor which spiraled off into the darkness. The corridor opened into a larger chamber. With a word, Sirana conjured a small spark and flung it upward. When it struck the ceiling high above, it burst into a brilliant glowing ball, illuminating the chamber.

"I could have done that," Listle grumbled, banishing her own smaller puff of pale, silvery light with a perturbed gesture.

The chamber appeared to be a throne room of some sort. Two dark rows of columns, each carved in the form of a beast-faced pit fiend, supported the high domed ceiling. In the chamber's center was a raised dais bearing an onyx throne.

"Are you certain we're heading the right way, Kern?" Listle asked, scrambling over the remains of once opulent furniture. "I don't see any way out of here."

"This has to be right, Listle." He cocked his head and nodded. Yes, the hammer's song was clear. Suddenly he frowned. He could hear another sound as well, like a distant groaning. He glanced at the others. By their puzzled expressions, they heard it also. Rapidly the noise grew louder, building to a roar that echoed down the corridor.

"What is it?" Daile asked, gripping her bow with a white-knuckled hand.

"Does that answer your question?" Listle pointed, silvery eyes wide.

A small army of blank-eyed creatures lumbered into the chamber. Some were human in form, others elven or dwarven. All of them were horribly decayed. A putrid, overpowering reek preceded them. Jagged bones stuck out through their mottled skin, and chunks of flesh fell from their limbs as they moved. Their eyes bulged as they hungrily stretched out their arms.

"Ghouls!" Miltiades shouted to the others. "Arm yourselves!" The first wave of creatures shambled within reach, baring their broken teeth. Like zombies, ghouls were undead, raised from the grave with evil magic. But unlike zombies, ghouls had an insatiable hunger for living flesh. Only Miltiades was of no interest to them.

Kern swung his warhammer in a blazing arc, smashing through the heads of the first two ghouls. Their bodies collapsed to the floor, twitching. In revulsion, Kern shook gobbets of rotting flesh off his weapon.

Daile loosed several arrows in rapid succession into the chest of another ghoul. The creature momentarily staggered backward, then continued forward, oblivious to the shafts protruding from its body. Realizing her bow was useless, the ranger quickly slung it over her shoulder and drew the magical daggers Right and Left from her boots. She slashed out at a ghoul reaching for her. The enchanted blades sliced through the thing's flesh, both of its arms dropping to the floor with a sickening plop. The ghoul stumbled away in a daze.

With his broadsword, Miltiades was cutting a wide swath through the horde of undead. Listle uttered the words of a spell, and suddenly a half-dozen of the ghouls were transformed into healthy, live humans and elves. It was an illusion, of course. However, seeing apparently living beings in their midst sent a score of ghouls into a frenzy. They dragged the illusory creatures to the floor and began to feed on them.

Kern had lost count of how many ghouls his warhammer crushed into pulp. Magical lightning sizzled and crackled constantly over the ranks of the undead, charring them to ashes—the work of Sirana's magic. Yet despite the broken, twitching bodies that piled up, still more ghouls shambled forward. Kern's heart pounded in his chest. He wasn't certain how long he could keep up the steady onslaught of his hammer. But the moment he stopped, the ghouls would drag

him down with their clammy hands and start feasting.
He kept fighting.

A cry of pain snapped his gaze around. He saw Daile stagger backward. A ghoul had torn a ragged gouge the length of her arm. Swiftly Miltiades stepped next to her, cleaving the filthy ghoul in two with one swing of his sword. The ranger clenched her jaw against the pain as she continued to lash out with her deadly daggers.

"We can't keep this up forever!" Kern shouted, shattering the rib cage of a dwarven ghoul.

"Well, we can't exactly stop, either," Listle retorted. A trio of ghouls lunged toward her, only to impale themselves on a rack of ancient, rusted spears the elf had turned magically invisible.

"The Hammerwarder's dark magic has summoned every being that has ever perished in this valley," Miltiades explained. He decapitated a female ghoul clad in a rotting silk gown. "This has always been a place of evil, and of peril. I can only guess that thousands of lives have ended in this vale."

"I think there is a way to stop the ghouls from coming," Sirana said, "though I had hoped not to have to resort to it." From beneath her gown she drew out a strangely shaped amulet of polished bone and pointed a finger toward the chamber's entrance. The stone archway began to glow a dull orange, then a fiery red. Molten rock flowed down, incinerating a dozen ghouls. In moments the molten rock began to cool and solidify. Soon the entrance was sealed by a dark, shapeless blob of solid stone.

The adventurers swiftly dispatched the remaining creatures, reducing them to putrid-smelling heaps of carrion and bone. Exhausted, they slumped on the dais before the onyx throne, gasping for breath—except for Miltiades, who seemed tireless.

"Your spell did the trick, Sirana," Kern said, his chest heaving. "Why did you wait so long to use it?"

"I had hoped not to have to use the amulet," the wild mage replied. "It may have stopped the flood of ghouls, but it has also sealed off the only way out of this chamber."

They saw to their battle wounds then. Most had escaped with only a few bruises, but the gash on Daile's arm was more urgent. A wound caused by a ghoul's filthy claws invariably festered, poisoning the blood. Eventually, the victim would die—and become a ghoul.

"Fear not, Daile," Miltiades reassured the ranger. He knelt beside her, removing his gauntlets, and whispered a brief prayer to Tyr. A blue nimbus sprang to life about his skeletal hands. In moments the gouge on Daile's arm closed and scabbed over. Miltiades nodded in satisfaction, replacing his gauntlets. "It is done."

She sighed in relief. "Thanks, Miltiades."

Kern gazed at his own hands wistfully. He wondered if there would ever be a paladin's healing in their touch. He shrugged and put the thought out of his mind. They had more pressing matters to worry about.

"None of these walls are illusory," Listle proclaimed in disgust after searching the throne room for the third time.

"And I can't find the slightest hint of any hidden doorways."

"I thought elvenkind had particularly keen eyes in such matters," Sirana murmured. The wild mage was examining a bruise on Kern's arm where his armor had been dented.

"This is absurd!" Daile exclaimed in exasperation. "I can't believe we've journeyed all this way and been through ... through so much just to end up locked in a room full of moldering old junk." She kicked a broken table out of her way. Feeling weary, she climbed the marble dais and plopped down into the massive onyx throne. It was so large that her feet swung freely in the air. Each of the throne's arms ended in gnarled, fiendish claws. Daile gripped them tightly in frustration.

The right claw moved.

She sat up with a jolt, fearing the throne was enchanted.

Then she realized that the stone claw was simply attached to the arm of the throne by a small, nearly invisible hinge. Curious, she lifted the claw.

A low grating sound rumbled through the chamber. Daile gave a small cry as the throne lurched beneath her. All watched in astonishment as the entire dais slid to one side, revealing a spiral staircase leading down into darkness.

"I knew that would happen," Daile lied with a crooked grin.

* * * * *

The songlike trilling in Kern's mind was strong. They were close to the hammer. Very close.

"I recognize this place." Miltiades spoke softly as the five moved stealthily down the dim passageway. "We are near the cavern where Phlan was imprisoned by the Red Wizard years ago."

The passageway bent sharply to the left. Suddenly the ceilings and walls dropped away. The group found themselves standing at the head of a flight of stairs, gazing out over a cavern bathed in a crimson glow.

"Tyr have mercy!" Kern whispered.

The vast cavern was filled with undead.

Corpses in every imaginable state of decay writhed below, as if performing some horrible mockery of a ballroom dance. So numerous were the refugees from the grave that Kern couldn't even spot the floor. Withered mummies covered with parchment-dry skin, bloated zombies dragging slimy entrails, and skeletal beasts baring feral fangs dotted the throng. Loose skulls rolled around the floor, nipping at heels, while severed arms scuttled through the crowd, trying to attach themselves to other undead beings.

These were the denizens of the coffin-walls, Kern realized. He gripped his enchanted warhammer. "I want to thank you all for coming this far with me," he said to the others, his green eyes solemn.

"You're not thinking of going down there, Kern!" Listle said with a horrified expression. "I know you've had some dumb

ideas before, but next to this, an ogre looks like a genius."

Kern swallowed his misgivings. "I have to go ahead, Listle. It's my destiny. But all of you can head back to the surface. There must be an exit other than through the throne room."

"No, paladin." Sirana laid a hand on his arm. "I made a promise to you. I intend to keep it."

"I, too, will stay at your side, Kern," Miltiades murmured in his sepulchral voice. "It was for this mission that Tyr raised me once again from the grave. It is my duty."

Daile shot Listle a fey grin. "I don't want to be the only one missing out on all the fun," she told the elf.

Listle rolled her eyes in vexation. "I can't believe I'm going to say this, but..." She sighed deeply. "Count me in, you ogre-brained oaf."

"Thank you," Kern said gruffly.

The five started down the stairwell.

The undead mob jabbered exultantly. Kern raised his warhammer as they descended. Suddenly he was no longer afraid of his destiny, no longer afraid of failure. All that mattered was that he try his best. As the animated corpses surged forward, Kern whispered a brief prayer to Tyr.

Suddenly the undead in the fore stumbled backward, shrieking in agony. A dozen of them crumbled into fine yellow dust.

"Kern, look at your shield!" Listle cried.

The plain shield of beaten steel that Miltiades had given him was now glowing with a holy light.

Miltiades laughed, a strange sound echoing inside his armor.

"Yes, Kern, that's it. Open yourself to Tyr's power. You've taken the first step down the path toward being a paladin. The minions of evil will not dare stand before you."

Miltiades' own shield erupted in azure light, adding its strength to Kern's. The triumphant cacophony of the undead quickly changed into shrieks of terror. They fought past each other to get away from the searing light. Those caught in its radiant beams burst apart into clouds of bone dust.

Shields before them, Kern and Miltiades cut a wide swath through the cavern, Listle, Daile, and Sirana following close behind. The undead howled in fury, but none dared to approach the holy ward surrounding Miltiades and Kern. Suddenly the vast archway of the nave loomed before the adventurers.

Well met, Hammerseeker, a vast and terrible intellect announced from the darkness. Have you come to bow to me before you face your doom?

"Show yourself," Kern called out.

As you wish, the creature crooned wickedly.

The shadows swirled and parted. Something stepped into the light.

"An osyluth!" Sirana hissed. "A fiend from the Nine Hells, but like none I have ever seen."

The others could not take their eyes from the creature that towered over them. Grub-white skin was pulled tautly over the osyluth's bony, humanlike limbs. Pinprick eyes burned hotly in its skull-mask face. Behind the osyluth lashed a curved, many-jointed tail, ending in a barbed tip oozing a thick yellow fluid. In the half-light, Kern caught a glimpse of what looked like a fine silver chain attached to the creature's abdomen, stretching back into the blackness of the nave.

Your doom is upon you, youngling. The osyluth spat venomously.

There was no time to react as the monstrous creature raised a spidery hand and hurled a sphere of shadow. The orb struck the adventurers, bursting into a thousand pieces of ebony. Kern blinked and saw that his armor was covered with a fine dusting of blue cobwebs; his unmagic had counteracted the osyluth's spell.

But the others had not been so fortunate. Listle, Daile, Sirana, and Miltiades all stood perfectly motionless, frozen in midaction. They were not the only ones. The entire cavern had fallen into silence. The throng of undead was frozen as well. Kern was the only one moving in the deathly quiet

cavern.

Except for the osyluth.

So, you dare to resist my magic, do you, youngling? The creature scuttled forward, raising a huge, cruelly tipped spear. That is of little moment to me. It will be all the more satisfying to eat your living flesh.

It thrust the spear downward. Kern barely had time to deflect the blow with a swing of his warhammer. The two weapons clashed in a spray of sparks. Hammerseeker and Hammerwarder circled each other. The osyluth lunged again, but Kern blocked the blow with his glowing shield.

You are skilled in battle, thief. The osyluth hissed.

"Why do you call me that?" Kern cried, swinging his warhammer.

The fiend scuttled out of the hammer's reach. Because that is what you are. The osyluth's mental message brimmed with loathing. You have come to steal that which is not rightfully yours.

"The hammer belongs to Tyr!" Kern shouted angrily, ducking the creature's spear.

That is not true, youngling. Eons ago, Tyr stole the hammer from my master, Bane. It was Bane who forged it. The hammer does not belong to your accursed god.

"You lie!" Kern shouted. He swung his warhammer wildly, but the blow went wide.

No, youngling, I do not. You know in your heart that I speak the truth.

Kern shook his head dizzily. The osyluth was lying. It had to be lying.

Doubt flickered in Kern's heart. At the same moment, the light emanating from his shield wavered, dimmed, then went out. With a cry of rage, Kern dropped the shield and gripped his hammer in both hands. "You lie, fiend!" he screamed. Fiercely, he swung his hammer at the osyluth.

But his footing was not secure. He slid across a scattering of platinum coins and tumbled to the floor, the hammer

skittering away from his hands.

It was just like the nightmare.

Howling with laughter, the osyluth rushed forward. The creature raised its spear for a deathblow.

And now, Hammerseeker, you will seek no more.

Something thin and silver glimmered as the osyluth moved—the chain dangling from the fiend's body. Only it wasn't really a chain, Kern saw now, as the creature loomed over him. It was more like a thread, stretching back into the darkness. A realization struck him.

This, too, had been part of the nightmare!

In a heartbeat, Kern knew what he had to do. In desperation, he snaked out an arm, fingers stretching toward the hammer. Even as the osyluth thrust its spear downward, Kern pulled himself to his knees and swung the hammer at the silver thread.

There was a brilliant, sizzling flash. The osyluth screamed, dropping its spear. The enchanted hammer shattered in Kern's grip, and shards of silver and steel flew in all directions. Kern was momentarily blinded, but when his vision cleared, his heart sank. The blow had not severed the osyluth's silvery thread.

Kern could see now that the thread was attached to a huge web stretching across the back of the nave. The web must be the source of the osyluth's power. That was the secret the creature had unwittingly revealed in the nightmare. Bound in the center of the web was a metallic, cross-shaped object, obscured by sticky threads. Kern had no doubt of what it was: the Hammer of Tyr.

The osyluth chortled evilly. This grows sweeter and sweeter, youngling. Its breath was fetid with the scent of death. It would be sweeter yet to crush you with the hammer you have so foolishly sought, would that I dared to wield it.

In its gloating, the osyluth did not realize its mistake.

It doesn't dare to touch the hammer! Kern realized. If Bane truly forged the hammer, why would Bane's servant fear to

use it?

He knew the answer. The osyluth had lied. The hammer was Tyr's.

The osyluth flicked its tail, bringing the barbed stinger close to Kern's throat. Venom glistened on its tip.

A memory flickered through Kern's mind....

For a split second, he was in Phlan once again, sitting with Tarl and Listle by the fire in Denlor's Tower. His father was telling a story, a story about... the hammer.

"... and no matter how far I threw it, it always returned to my hand when I called it..."

At last, victory is mine! The osyluth shrieked.

Kern closed his eyes. He knew he had just one chance. Come to me! he called out in his mind. Come!

With a rending sound, the Hammer of Tyr wrenched itself from the center of the web. Shining brilliantly, it flew through the air, directly into Kern's outstretched hand.

He didn't hesitate. Even as the osyluth's stinger descended, Kern hurled the hammer with all his might back toward the web. Awakened by the touch of one faithful to Tyr, the hammer burned with fury, striking the web that had imprisoned it moments before, burning it to ashes.

No! The osyluth screamed in terror. This cannot be! Holy blue fire snaked along the thread toward the osyluth, engulfing it. The creature writhed in agony.

Kern summoned the hammer back to his hand; it felt comfortable and right in his grip. "It's time you joined your master, Bane," Kern said between clenched teeth.

He swung the Hammer of Tyr. It struck the osyluth full in the chest. With a thunderclap, the fiend burst apart in a spray of bone splinters and shreds of dry, parchmentlike skin.

Kern's nightmares had come to an end.

* * * * *

The sun sank into a sea of molten bronze clouds behind the jagged stump of the red tower.

Kern sat, exhausted, on a granite boulder, the others around

him. The enchantment paralyzing them had vanished when the osyluth died, as had the dark magic animating the horde of undead that filled the cavern and the rest of the red tower. All had collapsed into dust when the web was destroyed.

Listle grinned at Kern. "You know, that wasn't half bad. For an ogre-brained oaf, that is."

"You do him a disservice, illusionist," Sirana chided gently. She laughed, a sound like golden bells. "You are truly a hero, Kern. Do you think I could hold Tyr's hammer?" Her dark eyes glowed. "I doubt I will ever be this close to so holy a relic again. It would mean a great deal to me."

"Of course, Sirana," Kern said. "I could never have gained the hammer without you." He took the ornate weapon from his belt. In the fading sunlight, fine runes glowed on its flawless steel surface.

Suspicion flared in Listle's heart. "Kern, don't do it!" she shouted. Too late.

He held out the hammer.

Without hesitating, Sirana snatched it up with a triumphant expression. "At last, it is mine!" she cried exultantly.

Kern stared at her in astonishment.

Suddenly an expression of agony twisted Sirana's face. She screamed in pain, dropping the hammer. "By all the blackest gods, it burns!"

Kern and the others watched in horror as Sirana's lovely coppery skin began to bubble and smoke. Two stumps sprouted from her back, unfurling into vulturelike wings covered with oily black feathers. In moments the beautiful wild mage was gone. In her place stood a creature that was formed only vaguely like a woman. Her body and face were hideously misshapen. Dagger-shaped fangs curved down from her crooked maw, and sharp talons sprouted from her gnarled fingers. Her wings beat furiously, casting off a foul odor.

"A foul erinyes!" Miltiades spoke grimly, raising his sword.

"Oh, vile paladin, don't you find my true form lovely?" the erinyes Sirana rasped in a croaking voice. "If not, you may blame it on my human father, the Red Wizard Marcus. Human and fiendish blood do not mix well, but I care nothing for beauty. I can don it like a cloak, or cast it aside when I need it no longer. It is power that matters to me!"

"Like the power of Tyr's hammer," Kern said, shaking his head in wonderment. He knelt to retrieve the relic from the ground where it had fallen.

The erinyes whirled on him. "Yes!" she hissed. "I will have it, you foolish little puppy. Just as I will have revenge upon you, and all of Phlan as well." She turned her murderous gaze toward Miltiades. "You will pay for slaying my father. You all will pay!"

"But you have failed, Sirana," Listle said, her voice hard.

"Think that if you wish, elf," the erinyes snarled. "But I have a source of power which I have barely begun to tap. You will never defeat the magic of the pool of twilight! Never!" The half-fiend began to back away from the others. "Vengeance will be mine!"

"Don't let her escape!" Daile cried. She raised her bow, but before she could loose an arrow, the erinyes gripped the bone amulet at her throat. In a puff of smoke, she vanished. Daile's arrow passed through thin air.

Sirana was gone.

13

Vows of Vengeance

Patriarch Anton watched intently as Sister Sendara, augur of the Temple of Tyr, let the runestones slip through her fine-boned fingers. The timeworn pebbles, each carved with a holy symbol, tumbled onto a round silver plate. The wizened priestess peered at the stones, studying the pattern they made as they fell.

"What do you see in the temple's future, Sister Sendara?" Anton asked softly. The two were alone in a small candlelit antechamber off the temple's main hall.

"A moment, Anton," Sendara scolded. "Fate cannot be rushed."

Anton smiled at this gentle rebuke. Of all the clerics left in Phlan's temple of Tyr, only Sendara was older than he was, and only she spoke to him in such a familiar manner. If sometimes she was not as respectful to the patriarch as custom dictated, Anton took no offense. After all, Sendara had been a full cleric of the faith when he could do little more than coo and slumber in his mother's arms.

"These are ill-tidings," she said finally in a cracked voice.

"What is it?" Anton glowered at the stones scattered across the silver platter. They meant nothing to his untrained eyes.

"A shadow approaches the temple of Tyr." Sendara's dark eyes were like bright chips of obsidian. "A foe who has attacked us once before gathers together even greater strength. Soon we will be awash in a sea of darkness."

"Are you certain?"

The ancient priestess frowned at Anton, hands on the hips of her soft gray robe. "It's not as if I'm making this up for dramatic effect, you know."

Anton sighed deeply, placing his hands on her thin shoulders. "I know, Sendara. I know. It is difficult news to bear, that's all."

"As will be the dark days to come." Sendara extricated herself from his grasp. "But there is more, Anton, and on this the runes speak clearly." She gazed at the scattered stones again. "Phlan has suffered many foes and many battles in its history. But none have ever been so dire, or so important, as this. We must prevail in our coming trials, or all will be lost."

"What do you mean, Sendara?"

"I mean, Anton," she said somberly, "that if the temple of Tyr falls before the hammer is returned, then all of Phlan is doomed. Forever."

She gathered her runestones and slipped them into a small silken pouch, leaving Anton alone in the antechamber to contemplate her words. A chill had settled in the old

patriarch's bones, but he didn't know if it was from the wintry air or Sendara's frightening words. He found himself wondering once again how Kern and the others were faring on their quest for Tyr's hammer.

A thought struck him. He left the antechamber, making his way through the temple's upper corridors. It was after vespers, and candles had been lit against the gathering gloom outside. He knocked on a small wooden door and entered a room, finding Tarl Desanea sitting in a stiff-backed chair. His stricken wife lay before him. Tarl had moved her from their tower to the sanctuary of the temple several days before. Anton could hear her breathing, painfully slow in its rhythm.

"It's dark in here," the patriarch rumbled softly, lighting a candle.

Tarl shrugged his massive shoulders. "It isn't as if either Shal or I care."

Anton winced. Sometimes he forgot that Tarl was blind.

"You didn't come to evening prayers." Anton sat in a chair next to his friend.

"I said my prayers here," Tarl answered. His voice was flat and toneless, but Anton caught the bitterness in it.

Anton took a deep breath. "Have you received any sign that might tell you how the Hammerseeker fares, Brother Tarl? Any word from Tyr?"

Tarl's blind eyes seemed to gaze out the darkened window.

"Nothing. I have felt nothing."

After a moment's hesitation, Anton decided to tell Tarl his reason for asking. He recounted the augury that Sister Sendara had just prescribed. If the temple fell, Phlan would be lost.

Tarl turned his sightless eyes toward Anton. "Phlan will be lost?" His haggard voice was almost mocking. "If Kern does not return, Anton, my family will be lost. If Kern perishes, then so will Shal. I will have no one." He hung his head, at a loss for more words.

Anton's shaggy eyebrows knitted into a scowl. Lately, Tarl had been sinking into a black despair, but Anton had not realized how hopeless the cleric's attitude was until now. This could not go on. "There are others besides you and your loved ones to think of, cleric of Tyr," Anton said sternly. "Regardless of whether the Hammerseeker succeeds or fails, the temple must stand. All of us must be ready to fight the coming battle."

"Really?" Tarl asked hoarsely. "And how does a blind cleric fight, Anton? Shall I have good Brother Dameron point me toward the enemy and kindly tell me when to start swinging?" He shook his head fiercely. "No. I wish you luck in your battle, Anton, but my own battle is here." He reached out a hand to smooth Shal's fiery hair from her pallid brow.

Anton rose from his chair, suddenly angry. "Do not speak to me of your private battles, Tarl. I have watched as, one by one, our brothers and sisters have been struck down by the scourges sent by the gods of evil, the enemies of Tyr. I have watched as foul disease rotted their bodies in the space of an hour, and as searing flames consumed them in an agonizing minute, all because the temple's aura could no longer protect them."

Anton clenched his big hands into fists. "The day you survived the scourge sent against you, Tarl, I was filled with joy. It gave me hope that the temple could withstand the evil with which the gods of darkness afflict Phlan. But now I see that I was wrong." He paused by the door, his face grim. "We have lost you after all, Brother Tarl."

The patriarch left, shutting the door behind him.

Tarl clenched his hands into fists. Who was Anton to speak to him so, as if he were simply some sulky acolyte feeling sorry for himself? Why couldn't he see there was nothing Tarl could do to help the temple, let alone his wife and son?

But gradually the rage ebbed in Tarl's heart.

A remembered voice echoed in his mind. Never forget, husband. You are the same man you always were.

Shal. She would have agreed with Anton, Tarl knew. But her words seemed so distant now, so hollow.

"I am different, Shal," he whispered to her sleeping form, reaching out a hand to grip hers tightly. "And I will never be the same again."

* * * * *

In a distant chamber high in the temple, Sister Sendara reached down and removed one of the thirteen rune-stones scattered on the table before her, slipping it into a black velvet pouch. Now only a dozen remained, leaving the pattern incomplete.

"We are doomed," she whispered to the night.

She blew out the lone candle, but there would be no sleep for her that night.

* * * * *

Deep beneath the Dragonspine Mountains, a howl of sublime fury echoed off the cavern's glistening limestone stalactites. A hideously malformed creature hobbled on clawed feet to the edge of the pool of twilight, greasy black wings flapping feebly in useless agitation. Magical energy still surrounded the creature, the residue of the powerful spell that had, in the space of a heartbeat, carried her to this place.

"I had it!" Sirana screeched. "The Hammer of Tyr. I held it in my hands!"

She lifted her arms and gazed at the burnt, horribly twisted claws that had been delicate hands only moments earlier. Another shriek of rage escaped her lopsided mouth, rattling the very foundation of the mountains.

Something stirred beneath the pool's dull, metallic waters.

You should have known the holy power of Tyr's hammer would reject the touch of evil, a voice bubbled up from the murky depths.

"Why did you not see fit to share this valuable information with me?" the half-erinyes wizard ranted.

You did not deign to ask me, sorceress.

"You wretched worm! Do you dare mock me?" She raised a

gnarled claw, ready to fling a bolt of magic to the cavern's ceiling and send a rain of razor-sharp stalactites plunging into the pool.

Never would I mock you, sorceress, the guardian of the pool whined. Come, place your hands in my waters. I will take your pain away.

Momentarily placated, Sirana knelt by the edge of the pool and slipped her hands into the viscous water. Suddenly dozens of glowing flecks appeared, swirling about her wrists like miniature stars. She gasped, feeling a strange tingling in her fingers. She jerked her hands out of the pool.

"What have you done to my—" she began suspiciously. Suddenly she halted, entranced. Her hands! They were whole again. The pain caused by the Hammer of Tyr had vanished. In wonderment, Sirana flexed her fingers. They were smooth and shapely, ending in delicately curved nails as dark and hard-edged as obsidian.

Yet the rest of her was as hideous as ever.

She could use magic to cloak herself with the disguise of beauty, but that could never change the misbegotten form that was her natural condition. Yet the pool could! Ah, how glorious it would be, to be truly beautiful, just like her mother had been.

I cannot, sorceress. Unless, of course, you are willing to submerge yourself in the pool...

For a fleeting moment, Sirana was tempted.

But only for a moment. She laughed, a sound filled with loathing and contempt. "A clever trick, beast. But not clever enough." She stood, eyes blazing.

"I told you that I will not free you until you have granted me the power I need to destroy Phlan." Magic crackled away from her in every direction. Smoking chunks of rock fell from the cavern's roof, exploding like bombs as they struck the pool. Its waters roiled turbulently as the guardian writhed beneath. "Now, I demand that you give me more power, beast. Power enough to destroy Phlan once and for all!"

As you wish, great sorceress! the guardian sniveled. Drink! Drink, and the power shall be yours.

A silver chalice rose out of the pool and hovered before Sirana. She grasped it with her newly restored hands. Once before, she had drunk but a mere drop of the twilight pool's waters and had gained fantastic power—enough to summon a dreamstalker from a distant world. What would be the effect of drinking an entire chalice of the liquid? She gazed at the metallic fluid within the cup, hesitating. Brilliant flecks of light swirled beneath its surface.

"I must have the might to destroy Phlan!" she whispered.

Her hesitation faded. She raised the chalice to her lips and drained its thick, oily contents in a single draught.

The chalice clattered to the hard stone and rolled away. Sirana reeled, her heart pounding furiously. Magical energy like she had never before imagined surged through her veins. It buoyed her, lifting her so that her feet hardly touched the ground. She raised her arms in exultation, feeling the soft fabric of shadows sift through her fingers. Understanding rippled through her mind. One drop of the pool had granted her the ability to see all the myriad shades of darkness that existed in a single shadow. But now she could cup that darkness in her hands, mold it, shape its form, and breathe evil life into it.

Yes, sorceress, the guardian of the pool whispered in her mind. You can forge shadow images of any creature you desire, and they will serve you with all the powers of twilight!

"I shall create an army!" she cried, gathering the stuff of shadows about her, draping it around her deformed body.

"An army of shadows!"

She wasted no time. With her hands and mind, she began to mold the darkness into a fearsome form. She gave it long, muscular arms and serrated fangs in a jackal-shaped snout. Last she fashioned a sinuous tail ending in razor-sharp spikes.

She stood back and admired her handiwork. Now this was a fiend like none that had ever dwelled in the Nine Hells. A fiend born of shadow, whose only purpose was to serve Sirana. It bowed to her, and she clapped her hands in evil delight. Then she reached out, gathering more darkness to create another shadow fiend....

Suddenly she froze. She felt a strange prickling sensation, as if sensing the touch of a distant, roving eye. It lasted only for a second, then was gone.

Sirana shivered. "What was that?" she demanded of the guardian.

An enemy journeys through the mountains, seeking the pool.

"What?" Sirana snarled in outrage. "Show me."

The surface of the pool swirled. An image appeared, showing a stream tumbling through a narrow mountain valley. A woman with long chestnut-colored hair picked her way among the rocks, a large, tawny cat padding behind her. Numerous pouches hung at the woman's belt.

"Evaine!" Sirana recognized the sorceress from their earlier meeting.

The sorceress hunts pools like an owl hunts mice. She would destroy the pool of twilight, mistress. I have felt her magical detections reaching out for me once before. I thought I had dealt her a blow strong enough to annihilate her.

"Apparently you failed," Sirana observed venomously. She paced beside the pool's edge. "I shall simply have to deal with this meddlesome sorceress myself." A cruel smile curled about her misshapen lips. "And I think I know just the way."

She closed her eyes, sending forth a summons. "Come to me, dreamstalker. Come, and heed your leader's call!"

There was a hiss of dank, musty air. Ragged tatters of shadow began to swirl in front of Sirana. The half-erinyes plunged her hand into the midst of the shadow, her fingers closing around a dark, slender strand. With all her might, she pulled on the thread. The vortex of shadow exploded,

and the ethereal form of the bastellus materialized before Sirana.

"What do you wish of me, mistress?" the dreamstalker intoned in its somnolent voice.

"This woman is my enemy," Sirana snapped, gesturing toward the image in the pool. "I want you to feed upon her dreams. Feed until every last shred of her sanity has been consumed! Do you understand?"

The bastellus Sigh nodded. It could sense the power of the long-haired woman in the image reflected in the pool. Draining her spirit through her dreams would be satisfying indeed. With a grateful bow, Sigh melted into the air.

Sirana smirked. "Try to destroy my pool, will she?" She ran a slender finger under the jutting chin of the shadow fiend she had just created, then threw her head back and laughed.

Like tiny stars, faint sparks of light began to swirl beneath her skin, glowing the exact same color as the shining flecks of twilight in her eyes.

* * * * *

While Sirana gloated over her plans, reveling in her new abilities, the guardian sank to the bottom of the twilight pool.

The creature was well pleased.

The half-erinyes was becoming more and more ensnared by the magic of the pool. The guardian had been only too glad to grant her another drink of the pool's waters. Each taste would only make her hunger for more, and no matter how much the creature gave her, it would never be enough to satisfy her abominable cravings. It was only a matter of time before she succumbed to the temptation to submerge herself in the pool, to embrace its vast power. The moment she did, the guardian would be free. And the insufferable half-fiend would find herself imprisoned within the pool as its new guardian.

The creature writhed in the murky depths, sending bubbles floating sluggishly upward through the thick, metallic water.

Ah, how glorious, to fly again! What havoc the creature would be able to wreak once free of the blasted pool!

Sirana thought she had cause for vengeance against Phlan, but her hatred was nothing compared to the creature's own. Its loathing of that damnable city had grown during centuries of entrapment. Its strength had grown as well during those long, agonizing years. Once free, the creature's power would be nearly as limitless as its hatred. And then Phlan would pay for its past transgressions. ...

Soon, Dusk, the guardian murmured to itself. Very, very soon.

It had to be patient. But there was not much longer to wait.

Kern had always thought that the day he regained the Hammer of Tyr would be a day of unparalleled joy. But despite the solid weight of the ancient relic resting at his hip, he didn't feel much like celebrating.

They had gathered in the aspen grove at dawn to bid their last farewells to Ren. The first steely beams of light slanted between the ghostly trees, sparkling as they fell upon the fine dusting of new snow that mantled the ground. The winter air was cold, the wind perfectly still. It was almost as if the whole world were holding its breath.

Daile stood beside her father's body, gazing at the two magical daggers she held in her hands. Right and Left.

"Use your father's weapons well, Daile," Miltiades said solemnly. "You are Daile o' the Blade now."

"No," she said softly, shaking her head. She looked up, her blue eyes cold as ice. "These daggers protected me beneath the red tower, but I could never wield them like my father. No one could. They are his, and no other's."

Daile knelt and slipped the two blades into their sheaths in Ren's boots. Then she stood straight, unslinging her ashwood bow from her shoulder. She drew a red-feathered arrow from the quiver on her back and pulled back against the bowstring, aiming for the sky. With a cry, she released the arrow. It sped high into the slate-blue dome above. The

arrow traveled upward until Kern lost sight of it.

Suddenly the two daggers tucked into Ren's boots quivered. Each gave a small jerk as the knobs on the end of their hilts popped open. Two small, smooth stones rose out of the compartments concealed in the dagger hilts to whirl about Daile's head. The others stared in wonder.

Miltiades recognized the small stones. "They are Ren's ioun stones."

Daile nodded. She knew the story behind the stones. They had been stolen by a woman named Tempest, a thief. Tempest had been Ren's first love, but she was murdered by the Lord of the Ruins, the dragon who had sought to control the pool of radiance in the ruins thirty years earlier.

The two ioun stones settled onto Daile's bow and embedded themselves in the wood with a faint click. The longbow hummed brightly in the ranger's grip, then was quiescent once again. Daile nodded in understanding. The magical stones were her father's last gift to her.

She lowered her bow, her shoulders stiff and square. "From now on, I am Daile Redfletching," she said grimly.

The others nodded dumbly, alarmed at the ferocity in the young ranger's voice and the coldness in her eyes. Without a word, Daile turned to make her way back to the campfire.

The companions ate a cheerless breakfast of dried fruit and flatbread by the scant warmth of the fire. Miltiades, who had no use for food, instead drew a small brooch from a leather purse. The brooch was wrought of gold and set with a single clear gemstone.

"Evaine gave it to me," he explained to the others, "so that we might communicate with each other. I think she would care to know that you have gained the hammer, Kern. As well as the sorrowful news about Ren."

The skeletal paladin whispered the word of magic Evaine had taught him that activated the brooch. The crystal flashed, and an image appeared within its facets. The image showed a snowy, wind-scoured crag rising high above a

range of jagged peaks. There was no sign of Evaine anywhere.

"Where is she?" Kern asked with a frown.

Miltiades shook his head. "I do not know. If she still possessed the brooch, she would know I am calling her."

"She must have lost it," Listle said worriedly. "But where? Unless mountains have a habit of growing overnight, I don't think that's the forest around her dwelling."

"Those are the Dragonspine Mountains," Daile said, peering into the gem. "I recognize them from the map that Evaine created with my father's help."

Miltiades uttered another magical word. The gem went dark.

"This can only mean one thing. Evaine has journeyed into the mountains."

"But why?" Kern asked.

Listle's eyes widened in realization. "Don't you see? She intends to destroy the pool of twilight! Ridding Faerun of the pools is her life's quest." The elf swore sharply. "We should have known she would try something like this."

"Well, maybe Evaine knows what she's doing," Kern offered.

"After all, I don't think there's anyone who knows more about pools within a thousand leagues of here."

"That is true, Kern," Miltiades replied. "But no matter how wise Evaine may be, she cannot realize that Sirana is drawing power from the pool. I doubt she expects to face another sorceress, let alone a half-fiend mage who is in league with the magic of the twilight pool." The skeletal knight's breastplate shuddered. Kern would almost have thought it a sigh if Miltiades had been in the habit of breathing.

"Then we have to go after her, to warn her!" Kern stood.

Miltiades raised a gauntlet, halting him. "You forget, Kern. The Dragonspine Mountains are nearly a tenday's ride from this place. With her scrying spells, Evaine will certainly discover the pool before we reach her, no matter how hard we ride. Indeed, she may have already located it."

Kern hung his head in despair. "We have to warn her somehow," he said without much confidence.

"I think I might be able to arrange something," Listle said, hurrying over to her leather backpack. "I found these yesterday while I was wandering around the maze in the ruins. Something told me they might come in handy."

She pulled two cylindrical objects from her pack. With a flick of her wrist, she unrolled one of them. It was a bright, intricately patterned carpet.

Kern eyed the carpet skeptically. "Maybe I'm missing something here, but I fail to see how a rug is going to solve our problems."

Listle snorted with annoyance. "Sometimes you have absolutely no imagination, Kern." She snapped her fingers, and abruptly the carpet rose several feet off the ground, its golden fringe fluttering. "These are flying carpets!" Listle hopped onto the hovering carpet while the others watched in amazement. The elf positively beamed. "What in the world would you do without my help?"

"I shudder to think," Miltiades said, a note in his dry voice that might almost have been amusement.

Their decision was made easy for them. While Kern wanted nothing more than to hurry back to Shal and Tarl, he knew they must go to warn Evaine.

"I suppose this means we'll have to leave you behind," Listle said sadly, stroking the muzzle of her gray pony.

"I don't think you need bid your steed farewell, Listle," Miltiades said.

"I wish you were right, Miltiades," Listle answered glumly. "But somehow I doubt the horses will fit on the magic carpets."

"We'll see," Miltiades replied mysteriously.

The undead paladin whispered something into the ear of his magical white stallion, Eritophenes, who then pranced toward Listle's pony. Eritophenes bent his head over the dappled gray and snorted. A pale mist encircled the pony,

and suddenly the horse shimmered, shrinking in size until it became a tiny gray figurine standing in the snow. Eritophenes moved to the other horses, and in moments they, too, had been transformed by the stallion's magical breath into miniatures. Eritophenes let out a whinny, then also glowed brightly, shrinking into a small, prancing figure. Miltiades gathered the miniature horses and placed them safely in a pouch. Kern could only shake his head in wonder. That was another problem solved.

"Now if I could only do that with Kern when he's acting uncooperative," Listle mused.

"You know, Listle, you're really not as funny as you think you are," Kern grumped.

She gave him a flat stare. "What makes you think I'm joking?"

Quickly they broke camp and packed their things onto the carpets. But when it was time to go, Daile hesitated.

"I'm sorry, Kern," she said quietly. "But I can't go with you. At least not yet. I... I have to take my father back to the Valley of the Falls. I know he would want to lie by my mother's side."

Kern nodded gravely, gripping her shoulder tightly. He hated to part company with the ranger.

"Take one of the carpets, Daile," Listle offered. "We three can all fit on one." She shot Kern a wry look. "If this big oaf doesn't hog all the space, that is."

Kern nodded. "Do take it, Daile. And when you can, come find us in the mountains."

"I will, Kern. I promise."

With that, Kern, Miltiades, and Listle climbed onto one of the undulating carpets. At a signal from the elf, it rose into the air and sped northward.

Daile watched as the carpet dwindled to a speck, then vanished from sight. A frigid wind picked up, blowing her red-gold hair from her brow as she turned to face the dawning sun.

"I swear that I will avenge you, Father," she whispered. Her words were snatched away by the wind. "With the sky as my witness, I swear it."

Daile Redfletching turned her back on the brilliant orb of the sun and, taking the second flying carpet, trudged up the slope toward the grove of aspens.

14

Curious Encounters

"I don't know what's getting into me, Gam."

Evaine dragged herself out of her bedroll, blinking blearily in the brilliant morning light. This was the third day in a row she had woken feeling as if she had been up fighting battles all night long. Her dark eyes looked sunken, her skin sallow. She sighed as she sat cross-legged on her bedroll, slowly chewing a piece of hardtack. Even eating seemed a chore.

You push yourself too hard, Evaine, Gamaliel's voice entered her mind. And though you do not admit it, the cold bothers you.

"I don't mind it," Evaine countered, but in the same instant she gave a shiver, belying her words. The mountain cold seemed to seep right through her heavy coat and into her bones.

You never were a very good liar, Gamaliel noted.

"Then I guess I'll just have to practice some more, won't I?"

Evaine replied archly. The great cat's whiskers twitched in annoyance.

The sorceress set aside the hardtack. She knew she had to eat to keep up her strength, but she had little appetite. She gathered her willpower and stood, trembling as she gained her feet. Stiffly, she gathered her things and shrugged on her backpack.

"Let's go, Gam."

She started off through the snow, followed by her familiar. Evaine was certain they were nearing the pool of twilight. She had cast her scrying spell several times these last few days, at several different locations. After each try, she had

taken out her magical map of the mountains and, with a shining green line, marked the general direction of the spell. The pool was most likely concealed where the lines intersected. It was only a matter of time—and spells—before Evaine pinpointed the location exactly.

She could only hope that when she finally did find it, she would still have enough strength to destroy the pool of twilight.

She found herself wondering how Miltiades and the others were faring. Reflexively she reached up to touch the brooch of communication—but her fingers met only a small tear in her tunic. The brooch was gone. She sighed. How she had lost the gem, she did not know. Now there was no way for her to contact the others.

By midday the forest had thinned, giving way to a field of boulders that sloped toward a sheer cliff. Climbing the cliff with its crumbling overhangs looked to be an impossibility. However, a small stream had cut a steep but passable ravine into the cliff face. Picking their way carefully across the loose scree, sorceress and cat started up the defile.

Evaine quickly realized they were not the first travelers to have come this way. Indeed, they stumbled upon a faint but distinguishable path, marked here and there by small cairns. When the ravine widened into a broad, boulder-strewn bowl, Evaine saw the remains of a temple perched on the cliff top, now perhaps two hundred feet above them. It looked as if half of the structure had slid into the valley centuries ago, and what remained was wind-worn and roofless. But several colonnades of broken columns still stood, and a section of crumbling wall suggesting some sort of nave.

Evaine marveled at the ruin, wondering who had built a hall for their god in this place so long ago. It must have been a very holy site, she thought. Even now there was a peculiar serenity about the weathered columns that reached toward the azure dome of the sky.

The path continues up to the temple, Gamaliel spoke in his

mistress's mind.

Evaine nodded, and the two began to wend their way among the jagged boulders up the narrow path.

"Do you hear thunder?" she asked her familiar, frowning.

Winter is not the time for thunderstorms.

Evaine gazed at the sky. There wasn't a cloud in sight. She was about to accredit the noise she had heard to her imagination when suddenly she heard it again. It was louder this time, a low rumbling that grew with each passing second.

Evaine, look out!

The sorceress jerked her head up and gasped. A huge boulder bounced down the ravine toward the two travelers, pulverizing other rocks in its path. Gamaliel leaped toward her, knocking her aside. Entwined, the two rolled beneath a low granite overhang.

A second later, the boulder struck the overhang and bounced past, missing Evaine and Gamaliel by a matter of inches.

"You didn't have to be quite so rough," Evaine said testily, wriggling out of the crevice and brushing herself off. "A simple 'Duck!' would have been sufficient."

You're welcome, Evaine, Gamaliel replied wryly.

This made her laugh despite their close call. She scratched him affectionately behind the ears, then started back up the path that followed the narrow gully.

Moments later, another deep rumbling echoed down the ravine.

They were better prepared for the boulder this time, scrambling out of its path before it hurtled by. But they had barely resumed their trek up the ravine when the booming noise began anew.

"This is getting ridiculous," Evaine said in growing annoyance as the third boulder tumbled past the mouth of the shallow cave into which they had quickly scrambled.

Once that boulder was out of sight, the sorceress found an

ancient-looking cedar tree, gnarled and twisted by years of strong winds. She pulled herself up to its highest branches, which afforded a better view of the cliff top. What she saw made her stare in amazement.

"I think I've found the source of those boulders," she called down to Gamaliel.

Even as she pointed, a huge man-shaped form lumbered mechanically from between the temple's colonnades. The creature carried a massive boulder in its arms, moving toward a crumbling wall that ended abruptly at the cliff's edge. When the gigantic creature reached the end of the wall, it dropped the rock, and the fourth boulder started its noisy journey down the mountainside. Apparently unperturbed, the creature lumbered back through the temple to pick up another boulder and begin the sequence anew.

After watching this go on for a few minutes, Evaine scrambled down the tree.

What is that creature, Evaine? Gamaliel's tail twitched in agitation.

"I think it's a stone golem."

A golem?

Evaine nodded. "A creature made of some inert substance that has been magically animated—wood, iron, clay, or, in this case, stone." She winced as another boulder bounced past them down the ravine. "Which means that it's big, immeasurably strong, and almost completely impervious to injury."

I don't suppose you know why it keeps on tossing boulders down the ravine?

Evaine rubbed her narrow chin in thought. "I don't really know, unless ..." Her eyes flashed.

"A golem is a mindless creatures, Gam," she explained excitedly. "Its creator can give it only the simplest instructions, and the golem will perform those instructions literally. It could be that, long ago, this golem's creator

ordered it to keep the temple in good repair. But some disaster befell the temple. Half of the structure slid down the side of the cliff, and the rest was abandoned."

But the stone golem continued to try to repair the temple.

"Right. Every time the golem puts a boulder where the wall used to be, the rock falls into the ravine. But the golem isn't smart enough to realize what's happening. All it sees is that the wall needs another stone, so it tries to rebuild again and again."

How long will the golem keep trying to rebuild that one wall? Wind ruffled the great cat's tawny fur.

"Unless it's destroyed, forever." Evaine gazed up the ravine.

"Which means it's going to be hard for us to reach the top of the cliff. My guess is that it will take us about fifteen minutes to climb the last stretch of the ravine. But it only takes the golem a few minutes to find another boulder and drop it."

She shook her head in frustration. "There's no cover up there. We'd be crushed before we ever made it to the top."

If only the golem would drop himself over the edge of the cliff. Gamaliel growled angrily.

Evaine snapped her fingers. "Gam, that's it!" She started picking her way up the ravine. "Come on! We have to edge closer for my plan to work."

The two continued up the defile, every few minutes hiding under overhangs or squeezing inside cracks to avoid the tossed boulders. When they reached the final section of the ravine, they could see its sheer sides offered little protection. Already the golem was lumbering toward the broken end of the wall, bearing yet another boulder.

"This will have to do," Evaine muttered.

As the golem approached the precipice, she chanted the words of a spell. Suddenly a chunk of rock several feet wide quivered and liquefied into mud, sliding down into the ravine. Impervious to this change in its path, the golem lurched to the edge of the cliff.

For a moment, the golem teetered on the precipice. Then,

without the slightest resistance, it toppled over the edge. Golem and boulder went tumbling down the ravine in a spray of rock.

Evaine grinned, watching the creature plummet into the valley. A simple idea, but it had worked! "After you, Gam," she said. The two started toward the cliff top. Exhausted by the spell, Evaine could not move very fast, but there was less reason to hurry, now that the golem was gone.

They had made scant progress when a clattering of stone caused them to pause and gaze below. Evaine drew in a sharp breath of surprise.

The stone golem was climbing up the ravine.

The fall had not so much as scratched the creature. The golem moved with astonishing quickness, using its huge hands to help pull itself up.

As quickly as she could manage, Evaine hurried up the rest of the slope. Gamaliel shimmered into his human shape, using his strong arms to help her. She heaved herself up over the cliff's edge, Gamaliel right behind. The golem was mere seconds below.

The sorceress tried to ready a spell, but fear seized her mind; she couldn't think clearly. Gamaliel shimmered into his cat form to defend her, ready to fight the golem. Evaine knew that would be folly. The magical creature had the strength to rip both of them to shreds.

The stone golem reached the top, towering over Evaine and Gamaliel, blotting out the sun with its bulk. The creature raised its huge arms, lurching forward.

Evaine shut her eyes, hoping the end would be quick.

For a long moment, nothing happened.

Finally, Gamaliel spoke in her mind. Evaine, open your eyes. Reluctantly, she did as he asked. What she saw made her gasp in astonishment, then laugh aloud.

The stone golem went right past them, resuming its mindless task. Even now it was heading toward the crumbling wall carrying another boulder. As Evaine watched,

the golem reached the muddy cliff's edge—and without hesitating toppled once again into the ravine!

It will do that forever, won't it? Gamaliel asked. It will never learn.

Evaine nodded. "But thankfully, we won't be around to watch it." Weakly, she pulled herself to her feet. "Let's go, Gam."

They started off through the ruined temple, leaving the golem to its ceaseless labor.

* * * * *

"We're coming down too fast!" Kern shouted.

"I know, I know!" Listle shouted back in annoyance as the flying carpet plunged toward the treetops. "The updrafts are unpredictable this close to the mountains."

It had taken only two days to cover the distance from the ruins of the red tower to the southern edge of the Dragonspine Mountains. But it looked to Kern as if their flying carpet days were about to come to an abrupt and violent end.

The carpet caught a vortex of cold air, spinning wildly. Kern would have gone sailing off into the blue had it not been for the strong grip Miltiades had on his belt. An eagle wheeled past with a startled expression.

"Listle, I see a meadow not far ahead," the skeletal paladin said calmly.

The elf nodded. "I'm aiming for it."

The wind whipped Kern's hair wildly about.

"Here we go!" Listle cried, pulling on the pair of tassels that helped her steer the carpet.

Kern tightened his grip on the golden fringe. The tree tops flew by mere inches below. He could see the meadow now, perhaps a quarter mile ahead.

"We're not going to make it!" he yelled over the roar of the wind.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Listle snapped. She concentrated on keeping the magic carpet steady. Just a

little farther...

Suddenly a dead tree loomed before them, stretching its gnarled limbs higher than the surrounding foliage. Listle jerked hard on the tassels. There was a loud sound of rending cloth as a sharp branch punched through the fabric.

"The carpet's unraveling!" Kern shouted as they plummeted toward the clearing.

Sure enough, a thread from one end of the carpet had caught on the dead tree, and now the magical silk was unwinding behind them like a skein of yarn. The three had to crowd closer as the surface area of the flying carpet rapidly dwindled.

Listle yanked even harder on the golden tassels. The carpet managed to stay aloft for only a few more seconds. Then the last of the thread ran out.

Kern, Listle, and Miltiades fell through the air...

... and landed a half-second later on soft, dry, sweet-smelling grass.

Confused, Kern sat up, wondering why he hadn't been knocked dead by the fall. A glistening thread of silk settled slowly to the treetops, its end draped down over a dazed-looking Listle.

"The carpet managed to bear our weight until we were only a few feet above the ground," Miltiades offered in answer to their bewildered looks.

Listle sighed as she picked up one end of the silken thread.

"I think this is it for the magic carpet," she said glumly.

"Unless knitting also happens to be one of a paladin's special skills."

"I doubt it," Kern said with disdain.

The three gathered their scattered possessions. With a few magical words, Miltiades restored their three horses to their natural form. Kern's palfrey and Listle's gray pranced and snorted excitedly, apparently no worse the wear for having been miniaturized. Eritophenes, of course, was quite used to the experience.

They rode across the dun-colored meadow toward the snow-topped mountains. Now that they were here, Kern wondered how they would ever find Evaine. He and Listle discussed their options. Daile had said the scene revealed by Miltiades' communication gem lay close to the center of the mountains, so that gave them a general direction. Once they were in the actual vicinity, Listle thought she could whip up some spells to help them locate the sorceress.

Throughout this discussion, Miltiades had been quiet, but now the undead paladin spoke up.

"We will find her," he said confidently. "I will know when she is near."

However, just how he would know, he did not say. Listle and Kern exchanged a curious glance.

The sun was sinking toward the western horizon when they reached the forest that blanketed the lower slopes. Deciding it would be best to camp among the shelter of the trees, they decided to press on a bit farther. They guided their mounts down a winding trail, past silent stands of fir and ghost-pale aspen.

They had not gone far when sharp, ringing sounds broke the sylvan stillness. All three knew the familiar clangor of steel on steel. There was a battle going on not far ahead.

"Come on!" Kern cried, urging his mount into a gallop.

"Kern, shouldn't we be a little more cautious?" Listle called after him, to no avail. Muttering a few choice words about his lack of common sense, she rode after him, Miltiades close behind.

Moments later they burst into a circular glade open to the slate-gray sky. Kern halted for a second, taking in the scene. A frail old man was battling a huge misshapen creature. Even as Kern watched, the old man's blade—a heavy, antique broadsword—clashed loudly with the creature's spiked club. Somehow, the old man was managing to hold his own. He was wizened and ancient-looking, his flowing hair and beard as white as ivory. He wore no armor, only a

simple robe of dove gray. Even at this distance, Kern could see his sharp blue eyes sparking like steel against a whetstone.

The creature bellowed. With its massive, ten-foot frame, warty hide, and blazing purple eyes, Kern guessed it to be an ogre. The monster raised its huge club for a crushing blow.

Drawing the Hammer of Tyr from his belt, Kern spurred his mount forward, thundering into the glade. Listle and Miltiades were not far behind.

The ogre paused, looking up in dull-witted surprise. Then it snarled nastily, baring jagged black fangs. It lurched forward, ready to engage its new enemies.

"Xaraxa!" Listle cried out as she tossed a small ball of pitch mixed with bat fur at the monster. It exploded, and the creature roared, shaking its head, as Listle's spell blinded it.

The ogre swung its club wildly. Kern easily parried the blow. Upon striking his holy warhammer, the club splintered. Miltiades took advantage of the creature's confusion to deal it a blow with his sword, cutting a gash in the ogre's side. Its howl of pain was short-lived. Kern swung his hammer in a glowing arc, striking the ogre full in the chest. The creature toppled and did not rise again.

Quickly Kern dismounted and hurried to the old man, who leaned on the hilt of his broadsword.

"Are you all right, sir?" he inquired deferentially.

The old man snorted in disgust. "I was, until you and your overeager friends here showed up."

Kern stared at him in astonishment.

The old man's shaggy eyebrows bristled like gigantic, snowy caterpillars. "Fighting that rock-brained ogre was the most fun I'd had in months." He tapped a bony finger against Kern's breastplate. "And then you had to come and spoil it all!"

"I—I'm sorry," Kern sputtered, completely taken aback. "I didn't know."

"Well, now you do," the old man grumbled, sheathing his rune-covered broadsword. He turned to retrieve a battered leather pack from the ground. "And I suppose now that you've ruined my sport, you'll be expecting to come share my fire and my supper as well. That way you can be certain you'll spoil my day completely."

Kern stared after the old man, entirely at a loss for words.

The old man glared back. "Well, are you coming or aren't you?" Without waiting for an answer, he started across the glade. "Young people haven't a thimbleful of sense these days," he muttered into his beard.

Kern exchanged a puzzled look with Listle and Miltiades, then shrugged. There didn't seem to be much to do except to follow, so, leading his horse, he trailed along behind the stranger.

Despite his thin and frail appearance, the old man proved fleet-footed. Soon Kern was huffing noisily, and even Listle seemed to be having a hard time keeping pace. The old man moved farther and farther ahead of them until he finally vanished among the trees. Kern exchanged a worried look with Listle, wondering if he had purposely lost them.

The sky was growing purple with twilight when Kern caught sight of a warm, flickering glow between the trees. Moments later, he and the others stepped into a small clearing protected by the boughs of a huge fir tree.

"About time you showed up," the old man said testily. "It seems young people are getting slower these days as well as duller." He sat by a cheerful fire, stirring something in a small iron pot. Whatever it was, it smelled wonderful. Kern's stomach growled, a noisy reminder that he hadn't eaten anything since the few bites of flatbread that had served as his rather inadequate breakfast.

"Well, sit down already." The old man gestured to a fallen log. Kern and Listle sat obediently. Miltiades remained standing, as was his custom, eliciting a scowl from their host.

"Excuse me, sir," Kern finally blurted out as a steaming bowl of stew and a newly carved wooden spoon were shoved into his hands. "But would you mind ... er, that is, could I ask your name?"

"You can call me Trooper," he replied, handing Listle a wooden bowl. "I suppose it's as good a name as any I've been called and no doubt better than some!" Apparently he thought this some sort of joke, for he broke into a long fit of cackling laughter.

"No, thank you," Miltiades voice echoed inside his visor when Trooper offered him a bowl of stew. "I do not require food."

Trooper's bushy eyebrows knit together. "No, I suppose you wouldn't." He shrugged and began eating his stew, blithely ignoring his company.

Unsure what else to do, Kern swallowed a mouthful of stew, and for the next few minutes couldn't think of much else to say.

"Er, by the way," Kern said finally, "My name is Kern Desanea. And this is Listle Onopordum." He gestured awkwardly toward the elf, who was busily shoveling food into her delicate elven face. Trooper grunted noncommittally, apparently none too impressed with this information.

"And our companion is Miltiades," Kern added, gesturing to the paladin.

This name caused a flicker of interest in the old man's keen eyes. "Miltiades?" he said, setting down his bowl. "Now, I'm getting on in years, but I would be a spring chick a dozen times over compared to the paladin Miltiades. Tales tell he lived more than a thousand years ago." He shot a stern look in Kern's direction. "You wouldn't be pulling my leg, now would you, son?"

"He speaks the truth," Miltiades said, lifting his visor. The sight of the paladin's fleshless skull didn't raise so much as a shiver out of the old man.

"So he does," Trooper nodded. "Greetings, Miltiades, from one warrior of Tyr to another. I see that the old fellow doesn't have the decency to let you enjoy the rest you've earned."

"Tyr has given me a quest I have yet to complete," Miltiades intoned solemnly.

Trooper snorted, slapping his knee. "Is that so? Well, Tyr had better not try to raise these old bones once they're settled, that's all I can say! I'll look him flat in the eye and tell him to bother someone else's skeleton."

After they were through eating, Kern and Listle helped the old man clean the dishes.

"These are very nice," the elf remarked as she examined the spoons. Each was carved in a unique shape that followed the whorls and curves of the wood. "Did you make these yourself?"

"That I did," Trooper replied with more than a little pride in his voice. "Just this morning, in fact."

Suddenly a frown crossed Listle's face. "But how did you know to carve three of them?"

"It's always a good idea to be prepared for company," Trooper snapped cantankerously, taking the spoons and stowing them away. "As your presence here indicates, I might add."

Listle didn't pursue the matter, but her curiosity was definitely piqued.

"We've come to look for someone in the mountains," Kern explained. "She's a friend," he added.

"I should hope so, if you've come all this way just to look for her!" Trooper replied. He pulled out his rune sword and began polishing its edge with a bit of oilstone, carefully smoothing away small nicks and spots of rust. It was a beautiful weapon, with an intricately wrought hand-guard and strange carving all the way down the flat of the blade. Kern noticed at least one symbol that he recognized well—the scales of Tyr engraved on the sword's hilt

"You're a paladin, aren't you?"

Listle rolled her silvery eyes. "You mean you've only just now figured that out, Kern?" She leaned toward Trooper, shielding her lips with a hand. "It's only a theory," she whispered conspiratorially, "but I think his skull's as dense as that hammer of his."

Trooper winked at her. "I'll keep that in mind," he whispered in a voice that was quite audible all around.

Kern flushed in embarrassment, treating Listle to a withering look. She made a lame attempt to stifle her giggles.

"You fought well against that ogre today, Kern," Trooper said then. This compliment alleviated Kern's embarrassment a bit. "Not that I needed your help, mind you," the old paladin was quick to add.

"Of course not!" Kern hastily agreed.

Trooper looked up at Miltiades. "The lad has good command of that hammer, doesn't he?"

The undead paladin nodded in agreement. "His father taught him well."

Trooper grunted. "Too bad he doesn't have such a good command of his heart."

"What?" Kern asked.

Trooper turned on him. "Your heart boy! Heart! You know, that thing that squeezes blood around inside your rib cage." He thumped his chest for emphasis.

"I know what a heart is," Kern said in exasperation.

"Well, I suppose that's something," Trooper said with a fierce grin. "But do you know how to use it? Do you know how to make it your strongest weapon in battle?" His grin faded.

"Ah, but I suppose you're not interested in anything an old man like me could teach you."

Kern leaped to his feet, gripping his hammer. "Show me," he said intently.

Trooper laughed. "That's more like it, lad." He stood, his broadsword gleaming in the firelight. "Now, swing that hammer at me. Go on! Don't be shy about it."

Kern hesitated for a heartbeat, then swung. Trooper easily

parried the blow with a swipe of his rune sword. Both weapons glowed with blue light as they met.

"No, lad," Trooper growled. "You're swinging with your hands, not your heart. You can bash in a few orc skulls that way, but your arms may fail you when you're facing a foe that's stronger than you. Your heart is the only weapon you can count on in a crisis." He circled around the campfire, sword ready. "Now, have a go at me again, only this time let your heart guide your hammer."

Kern grunted as he brought the warhammer around. He tried to do as Trooper had instructed, but he wasn't quite sure what the old man meant. How could he guide the hammer with his heart?

Blue fire flashed as the hammer bounced off Trooper's rune sword.

"No, lad, try again! Don't hit me with your weapon. Hit me with your courage, your spirit."

Kern nodded, gritting his teeth. He tried to concentrate. Another swing, another flash of blue light. Gods, but he wanted to show Trooper what he was truly made of!

"Feel Tyr's power flowing through you, lad." Swing, flash. Kern grunted with effort. "Fighting's more than having a good eye and a good arm." Swing, flash. Kern was sweating in rivulets. "It's having faith, lad. Faith that justice will overcome!"

For all his life, Kern would never forget that moment.

It was like a dam breaking inside him. Sudden calm washed over him; warmth flooded his chest. Instantly he forgot about trying to impress Trooper with his skill, or trying to prove his worth. None of that mattered anymore. He felt strangely buoyant. He could hardly feel the weight of the hammer. All that mattered was that he have faith in Tyr and, more importantly, himself.

Kern's hammer moved through the air. Trooper tried to parry, but proved a fraction of a second too slow. Hammer struck sword, and the blade flew out of Trooper's hands, whirling

through the air.

Kern lowered his hammer, breathing hard. A grin spread across his face. Trooper nodded in approval as he retrieved his sword. "Not bad, son. Not bad at all." A sly smile curled inside his beard. "But then, next time I won't play so nicely." Kern's grin slowly faded. Something told him he still had a great deal to learn.

"Well, it's time for an old man to get some sleep," Trooper grumbled, putting away his rune sword and pulling out his bedroll. He spread it close to the fire. "I hope you all know that you've made a complete and utter mess of my day."

"We know," Listle replied sweetly. "But you're glad that we did."

He scowled at her. "Well, I suppose I am at that," he said gruffly, and then he went to sleep.

* * * * *

Judging by the rising crescent of the moon, it was well after midnight when Listle woke.

She sat up and cocked her head, listening with her delicately pointed elven ears. There it was again: a voice whispering among the trees. She slipped quietly out of her blanket, noticing that Trooper's bedroll was empty. Kern was snoring, sound asleep, and Miltiades appeared deep in reverie, gazing into the last embers of the fire. Silently, so as not to disturb either, the elf padded away into the shadows of the forest.

She followed the faint whispering, and moments later peered from behind a juniper bush to see a peculiar sight.

Trooper sat on an old stump, bathed in a faint blue radiance. The old paladin seemed to be engaged in a conversation with someone, though who it might be, Listle couldn't say. She didn't see anyone else in the clearing.

"Are you really certain he's worth the trouble?" Trooper muttered, his beard bristling. "Oh, he's brave enough, and strong, too. And I'll grant you that brains have never been a paladin's primary requisite. But he doesn't have much faith

in himself, you know."

The old man bent his head, as though listening to some reply. He scratched his whiskers thoughtfully. "True enough. Faith can be taught. But it isn't easy, and it takes time. A great deal of time, in fact, and that's something I really don't have too much of these days."

Trooper paused. Finally he sighed, nodding. "Well, it goes against my better judgment," he growled. "However, I'll do it if you think I should. But you owe me for this one, Tyr!"

Listle's mouth opened in a silent gasp as she hastily away. Had she heard properly?

"That's ridiculous, Listle," she whispered to herself as she slipped soundlessly through the trees. "He couldn't have been talking to ... to a..."

Shivering, she left that thought unfinished as she hurried back to camp.

Tarl stood on a balcony high in the temple of Tyr, breathing the wintry air. He turned his gaze out over where he knew the city lay, though all his eyes saw was perpetual darkness. Twilight had fallen, he knew, for he could no longer feel the faint warmth of the sun on his face. But he welcomed the numbing cold of night.

There had been no news of Kern or the others in the last days. No omen that might hint whether his son was alive or dead. Nothing. Anton said again and again that they must have faith, but Tarl found faith to be slight comfort. Faith could not whisk his son to his side. Faith could not heal Shal, who lay slowly, inexorably dying in her chamber.

Perhaps he would not feel so bad, Tarl thought, if there were anything he could do. Anything. But he was powerless. Nothing he did could wake Shal from her endless slumber or drive the shadows from her face. Nothing he could do would help Kern on his quest for the hammer. He couldn't even be of much help to his fellow clerics, who scurried about the temple like frightened mice, trying to fortify the structure against the dark onslaught Sister Sendara had foretold. Though he had tried to provide some assistance, he had only gotten in the way.

Tarl gripped the balustrade with white-knuckled hands. There was nothing to do but wait. Wait for an end—some end—to come.

Finally, even the cold of the night was too much for him to bear. It was time to go back inside, to sit by Shal's side.

Yet as Tarl started to step away from the balustrade, he saw something that made him hesitate. Something that moved in the veil of darkness.

He frowned. There it was again—a small splotch that was a deeper jet against the blackness of his vision. He blinked, wondering if this was some figment of his imagination. But no, even as he watched, the spot grew, like a far-off object edging closer.

"This cannot be," Tarl whispered as the dark blob grew larger

yet. "How can I see something unless it is ..."

Realization washed over him.

Magic!

Whatever was approaching the temple was magical in nature. As he had learned these last years, magic was one thing his otherwise useless eyes could discern. But what was the magical shape?

Tarl leaned forward, concentrating on the dark cloud. As it neared, he realized that it was composed of dozens of smaller objects, each surrounded by a faint crimson aura. As the swarm of objects drew closer, the shapes became clearer with each passing second.

"By Tyr above," Tarl gasped.

The dark cloud was not made up of objects, but of fiends.

Tarl waited for the temple's magical alarms to sound. The shadow fiends were flying swiftly upon their midnight-dark wings. They were mere minutes away from the temple's walls. Surely some of the other clerics had seen them by now.

But the night remained deathly silent.

"Sound the alarm," Tarl gritted between his teeth. "Are you all asleep? Sound the alarm!"

No hue-and-cry rang out. Then Tarl realized the obvious. The others could not see the shadow fiends. They were invisible to mundane eyes. Without further hesitation, he turned and dashed inside. He bashed his shins against an unseen chair but, ignoring the pain, stumbled on. He caught his shoulder on the door frame, and pain exploded in his chest, but he ignored that, too. He had to warn the others. Careening down the corridor like a madman, he began shouting.

"Beware, clerics of Tyr! A foe comes in the night! Beware!"

When he came to the stairs leading to the main hall, he would have fallen and broken his neck had not Sister Coreenna, a cleric of middle years, been there to catch him. He explained what he had observed in short, gasping sentences. An intelligent woman with nerves as steely as her

eyes, Sister Coreenna quickly helped Tarl downstairs and called for order among the small throng of clerics that had responded to Tarl's cry.

"Shadow fiends approach the temple," Tarl announced urgently. "We must act. They will be here in mere minutes."

"Shadow fiends?" Brother Dameron asked. The stout, round-faced young cleric wore a skeptical expression. "I've never heard of such a thing. Are you certain you're not mistaken, Brother Tarl?"

Tarl caught the note of condescension in the scholarly cleric's voice.

"What is it, Brother Dameron?" Tarl snarled. "Do you think me a blind simpleton, is that it? An old man who's lost his wits as well as his sight?"

Dameron's jaw worked soundlessly in surprise at the intensity in Tarl's voice.

"Forgive us, Tarl," Anton said. The grizzled patriarch's voice was grave and calm. "You have caught us off guard, that is all. Quickly, tell us what should we do."

"They are creatures of darkness," Tarl said without hesitation. "We must strengthen the temple's defenses against the substance that forms them."

He pulled his ceremonial hammer from his belt and, despite his unseeing eyes, swung it in a precise arc. It struck a green stone circle in the center of the hall's floor. Under the force of his powerful blow, the circle of stone sank into the floor with a hissing sound. There was a loud grinding overhead as seven lines appeared on the inside surface of the bronze dome. Like the petals of a huge, metallic flower, the dome split into seven sections, each receding slowly into the temple's walls to reveal a perfect circle of night sky.

"What have you done, Tarl?" Dameron cried in horror. "If foes do approach, you've just opened the temple for them!"

"Walls are no proof against creatures of shadow," Tarl replied intently. "It is with magic that we will stop these beings, and for that we must have a clear view." He raised his

warhammer toward the circle of the sky. "Now, clerics of Tyr!" Even as his voice rang out, inky forms swirled out of the night. As one, the assembled clerics began their resonant chanting. A pale blue nimbus sprang into existence across the circular opening above the temple. Several of the shadow fiends approached the nimbus and instantly burst into flame as they breached the holy light. But several of the creatures were too fast and had already slipped through.

These swooped down, landing lightly on three-toed claws. The crimson outlines of the magical fiends burned Tarl's vision. He swung his warhammer, its metal slicing through one of the creatures. The creature, ripped to shreds, quickly evaporated.

Sister Coreenna cried out as one of the fiends slashed at her back. Its head burst apart a moment later, crushed by Anton's hammer.

A third fiend lifted Brother Dameron bodily and hurled him through the air. The rotund cleric struck a marble column. He slumped to the floor and did not rise again.

The fiend whirled, its dark wings beating in agitation. Suddenly a hammer flashed through the air, ripping through the shadow fiend. It hissed in pain, then melted into thin air. Sister Coreenna slumped back to the floor. The hand that had thrown the hammer was drenched in blood, but her face bore a look of grim satisfaction.

"Louder, clerics of Tyr!" Tarl yelled as the shadow fiends fought the protective blue nimbus with their dark magic. The fiends surged forward as the holy light flickered. Then Tarl added his deep baritone to the combined voices of his brethren. The nimbus glowed with renewed energy, and a half-dozen more shadow fiends shrieked as they were consumed by brilliant flame.

So it went for the remainder of the long, dark night.

At times the voices of the clerics grew hoarse, their chanting faltered, and the shadow fiends nearly penetrated through the temple's protective barrier. But time and time again,

Tarl's voice rang out above the others, and in his example the other clerics found a reservoir of strength in their hearts. They chanted on.

Then came the first golden rays of dawn.

The shadow fiends writhed in torment as the light of the sun transfixed them, piercing them with its burning rays. They shrieked vile curses as their bodies dissipated, then their screams faded into a sigh on the wind. A golden radiance filled the temple. The morning light had banished the shadows of midnight.

The temple's clerics sank to the floor, exhausted. The tide of evil had been stemmed, and all knew it was due to Tarl's strength and bravery.

"It's good to have you back, Brother Tarl," Anton said gruffly, clapping a hand on Tarl's shoulder.

Tarl smiled despite himself. You were right, as always, Shal, he said inwardly, hoping that, somehow, she could hear him.

"Do not rejoice overmuch, clerics of Tyr!" a cracked voice called out, casting a pall of silence over the hall. The ancient priestess, Sister Sendara, hobbled into the room, leaning heavily on a gnarled staff.

"You have defeated a great evil this night, it is true," the priestess proclaimed. "But know that this battle was but the first drop of rain in the dark storm that is to sweep over us. Know this, and be ready!" With that the ancient priestess retreated back into her chamber.

A somber quiet filled the hall along with the morning sunlight.

* * * * *

"Close your eyes, Kern." Trooper's voice was a low murmur in his ear. "Open your heart and listen to the wind."

Kern squeezed his eyes shut, doing his best to obey the elder paladin's words. The travelers stood in the middle of a high plain, ringed on all sides by saw-toothed mountain ranges, gleaming white with snow. Wind hissed through the dry brown grass, making a beautiful yet forlorn sound.

"A palfrey is a fine riding horse," Trooper went on softly, "but a true paladin must have a steed worthy of riding into battle. A charger, Kern. Let the wind carry your call for a charger."

Kern's brow furrowed in concentration. He wasn't exactly certain how this was supposed to work. He had heard stories, of course, telling how famous paladins summoned snorting, stamping chargers to their sides with little more than wishful thoughts and prayers to Tyr. However, he had always assumed they were just that—fireside tales.

Trooper had been all too happy to correct him. The weathered paladin told how he had summoned his own dun-colored stallion, Lancer, many years before, and Miltiades had in turn recounted how he had called his first charger, long years ago. Now it was Kern's turn. He tried to imagine his message ringing out over the plains, all the way to the distant mountains. A charger, Tyr, he thought. Let a charger heed my call.

After a long moment, his eyes blinked open.

"Now what?" he asked.

Trooper gave him a quizzical look, then shrugged his thin shoulders. "Now we journey on. If a steed has heard your call, it will find us."

"If it didn't run as fast as it could in the other direction, that is," Listle added impertinently.

Kern groaned. "Listle, don't you have something better to do than make fun of me constantly?"

The elf thought about that for a moment. "No," she decided finally, shooting him a winsome smile.

Kern sighed. "Just checking," he said gloomily.

The four rode on across the frozen plain. No more than a quarter hour had passed when Kern heard something rustling through a nearby stand of tall, dry grass. His heart leaped in his chest. Could it be his charger? He dismounted, peering into the high grass expectantly.

With a snort, something burst into the open.

Listle's trilling laughter rang out brightly. "I don't know, Kern," she said with mock gravity. "Don't you think it might be difficult to joust with your heels dragging the ground?"

"Very funny!" Kern snapped hotly. He glared downward as the beast he had summoned oinked happily, nuzzling its bristly snout against his leg.

"I have only one question, Kern," Trooper said, his eyes sparkling. "Do you think you should ride it or roast it?"

"I'm not laughing," he grouched. Kern shook his leg, trying to get away from the pig. It grunted and trotted after him, its pink eyes shining with affection.

It took the better part of an hour and all the hazelnuts left in Kern's saddlebags to convince the pig to trot back into the tall grass. Finally, the four rode on.

It was nearing sundown when the riders halted on the edge of the plains. They made camp in a grove of oak trees at the foot of a high mountain. While the others busied themselves, Kern wandered to the edge of the grove. The westering sun had set the plains afire with color. A cold wind rushed down from the mountains, tangling his red hair.

Before he even knew what he was doing, he closed his eyes, once again sending out the call.

It was hard to forget Listle's laughter, or the amusement in Trooper's wrinkled eyes. Kern clenched his hands into fists. He had to show them that he could do it. Beside, he thought, there wouldn't be any witnesses if he failed this time.

He cast his thoughts to the wind, calling out with all his spirit. How long he stood there, he wasn't certain. But when he finally opened his eyes, the sun had dipped below the horizon, and purple twilight was filling the arms of the mountains.

For a time Kern listened, but heard nothing except the soft, lonely voice of the wind. With a sigh, he turned back to camp, hoping the others wouldn't guess what he had been trying to do.

Unfortunately, his worst fears were realized the moment he

stepped into the small clearing where they had set up camp. Listle, Trooper, and Miltiades were all staring at him.

"Er, Kern," the elf said after a moment's pause. "You've, ah, been trying to summon a charger again, haven't you?"

His shoulders drooped in dismay. "How did you know?"

"Oh, just intuition." Listle grinned crookedly. "That, and the big horse that's following you."

"What?"

Kern whirled about, his jaw dropping in surprise. He must have been so caught up in his gloomy reverie that he hadn't even noticed.

The steel-gray charger snorted softly, tossing its proud head. It moved forward, nuzzling Kern's outstretched hand. It was the most beautiful horse he had ever seen.

"Not bad, son," Trooper said, scratching his long white beard thoughtfully. "Not bad at all."

"You've gained the second power of a paladin, Kern," Miltiades announced gravely.

"But don't let it go to your head," Trooper quickly interjected. His bushy eyebrows bristled wildly. "You still have yet to master the third and final power. And that is the hardest one of all."

Kern, stroking the charger's smoothly muscled neck, barely heard the old paladin. "Your name will be Nocturne," he murmured softly.

The charger snorted, stamping a hoof, as if it was already well aware of this fact.

* * * * *

All the next day, they picked their way along narrow mountain trails. They kept to the valleys as best they could, but twice they were forced to guide their mounts up high passes treacherous with snow and ice. The day was clear and cold, and at times the sunlight reflecting off the snow was blinding.

Despite the difficult terrain, they made good time. They were able to use Kern's palfrey as a pack horse, and that

lightened the burdens the other mounts had to bear. Sitting astride Nocturne, Kern felt as if he had ridden the massive gray charger a thousand times before. The horse seemed to know exactly what Kern wanted him to do a half-second before Kern even thought it himself. The charger was strong and surefooted, eager to take the lead, breaking trail through high drifts of snow, picking the best route across dangerous stretches of loose scree.

Twilight found the companions deep in the mountains, seeking shelter among the pines in a narrow gulch. Listle had cast a spell of divination, hoping to discover if they were near Evaine, but she could not yet detect any traces of the sorceress.

Kern and Listle scouted through the forest in the gathering gloom, looking for firewood.

"I wonder how Daile is," Kern said as he broke a dead branch from a fallen tree.

"I hope she had better luck with the flying carpet than we did," Listle replied, gathering some dried moss.

"What do you mean, we? As I recall, you were the one steering the thing."

"Hmm, now," Listle murmured sweetly, as if she hadn't heard him. "I wonder if there are any nice mushrooms around here." She poked among the thick carpet of fallen pine needles. "Ones with pretty purple and red splotches would be nice." She smiled nastily. "After all, Kern just loves mushrooms...."

Kern groaned and moved off to find more firewood. A short while later, the two started back toward camp, Kern's arms full of wood and Listle's pouches full of tinder and, Kern suspected, poison mushrooms.

"Make yourself useful for a change, Kern," the elf said when they reached the steep, slippery bank of a small gully. "Give me a hand." Kern scrambled up the slope, dropping his load of wood at the top.

"Here, take my hand," he said, reaching down. She put her

small hand in his, and he heaved her up the slope.

However, as Kern leaned back, his heel skidded on a patch of loose rock. Both he and Listle went tumbling head over heels back into the gully. Kern grunted as he struck bottom, and a half-second later he grunted again as something heavy landed right on his chest, knocking the air out of him.

"Thanks for breaking my fall, Kern." Listle laughed, gazing down at him. The two had fallen in a tangle of limbs, the elf on top. "Perhaps there's hope for you yet. That was very chivalrous."

"Don't mention it," he gasped. "Now, unless you're trying to suffocate me, could you please get off me?"

Listle started to untangle herself from him, but suddenly she paused, her silvery eyes sparkling. "And what if I don't want to?" she asked slyly.

"What do you mean, what if you don't want to?" Kern wheezed.

The elf seemed to think about something for a moment. Suddenly she laughed, almost as if she had made a decision of some sort. She ran her slender fingers through his tousled red hair. "Maybe I like being this close to you. Did you ever think of that?"

He was about to inform her that, no, he'd never thought of that, when she kissed him, rendering speech quite impossible, at least for the moment. Kern's green eyes widened in shock.

A second later Listle sprang to her feet. "Well, don't just lie there," the elf scolded him. "We have to get this wood back to camp." This time she nimbly scrambled, unaided, up the embankment.

Kern felt a bit dazed. His lips tingled oddly, and a curious fragrance lingered in his nose, a scent like wildflowers in spring.

Finally he shook his head, pulling himself to his feet. He clambered up the slope, hastily picking up the fallen firewood and hurrying after the elf.

Why in the world had Listle kissed him? He felt more certain than ever that he would never understand the unpredictable elf. She made absolutely no sense. However, he couldn't help but think about kissing her again as he trailed after her; maybe the experience would be just as pleasant the second time around.

Kern picked up his pace. The fleet-footed elf had disappeared among the trees now, and he wondered if she was laying an ambush for him. Not that he was so certain he would mind....

A scream shattered the forest air.

Kern froze in his tracks. Listle!

He threw his load of firewood to the ground and broke into a run, gripping the Hammer of Tyr as he went. Branches whipped past him. Moments later he burst into a small glade. What he saw sent a shiver down his spine.

Listle was trying to fend off the attack of a monstrous creature.

The thing was like nothing Kern had ever seen before. It was the size of an ogre, but instead of arms, it had several tentacles springing from each of its shoulders. The long, scaly appendages cracked like whips. The thing's body was covered with long, kelp-like hair, and its misshapen head bore only a solitary, sickly green eye.

The creature opened a mouth filled with black, spiny teeth. "I have been searching for you for a long time, Listle," it rasped. "Your master, Sifahir, wishes to see you." The thing lashed out at the terrified elf with one of its tentacles. She shrank back against a tree, narrowly dodging the mighty blow.

Kern shouted as he charged. At the same moment, two other forms dashed into the clearing—Miltiades and Trooper. They were actually closer to the creature and reached it first. With his cadaverous grin, Miltiades plunged his sword into the creature's midriff. The blade passed through the monster without effect.

"It is an illusion!" Miltiades called out, but in that same instant a dark tentacle struck him in the chest, hurling him across the glen. The skeletal paladin's armor rattled as he fell to the ground.

"It hits awfully hard for an illusion!" Trooper growled.

Barely ducking a thrashing tentacle, he swung his rune sword, but the creature did not back off. "We can't hurt it, but it sure can hurt us!"

The thing stalked toward Listle, who was pinned against the tree, paralyzed with fear.

"Sifahir was most disappointed when you escaped from his tower, Listle," it hissed.

Kern reached the melee. Heart pounding, he swung his hammer, but nearly dislocated his shoulder as the weapon whooshed effortlessly through the monster's insubstantial body.

"No, Kern!" Trooper shouted. "Don't just strike at the illusion. Use the hammer's magic to break the enchantment!"

Kern nodded grimly, unsure just what Trooper meant. Even as he raised the hammer for another try, the creature struck at Listle. With a tentacle, it ripped the ruby pendant from her throat. She screamed as the silver chain snapped. The gem flashed bloodfire.

"Sifahir's necklace!" the beast screeched in triumph, holding the gem aloft. Its tentacles encircled the helpless elf, ready to squeeze the life out of her.

Now or never, Kern thought.

"Help me end this evil magic, Tyr!" he whispered fiercely.

The Hammer of Tyr glowed with sapphire light. Kern did not hesitate. He thrust the shining weapon deep into the illusionary beast's chest. He felt a jolt of energy course up his arm, but held his grip.

The beast roared in agony. Blue lightning sizzled through its body. The tentacles clutching Listle evaporated in a puff of acrid smoke. The elf sank weakly to the ground.

The creature writhed as azure lightning engulfed it.

Suddenly the crackling blue energy coalesced into a single jagged bolt that arced into the hammer. The weapon flashed brilliantly, then went dim.

The monster was gone.

Shoving the hammer into his belt, Kern rushed to the elf.

"Listle, are you all right?" He reached down to help her to her feet, but his hands passed right through her body.

"Don't touch me!" she screamed. She scrambled forward, grabbing the pulsating ruby pendant, which had fallen to the ground.

He stared at her in shock. Her form seemed to be flickering in and out of existence. In dull amazement, he realized he could see right through her. Trooper and Miltiades approached silently, standing behind Kern.

Listle grabbed the ruby necklace, hastily fastening it around her throat. The gem flared, then dimmed to a steady glow. The elf's form grew substantial once again, transparent no longer.

Slowly she looked up at Kern, her face moon-pale in the twilight, her silvery eyes filled with anguish. "I'm sorry, Kern," she whispered. Abruptly she sprang to her feet and dashed away through the trees, her sobs fading in the distance.

16

Shattered Illusions

The crescent moon had risen well above the treetops by the time Listle finally stepped into the light of the campfire. Kern gazed at her silently, not knowing what to say. Or even what he felt. A bowl of Trooper's rabbit stew sat on the ground before him, untouched.

"I suppose I owe you all some sort of an explanation," the elf said, sitting gingerly on a log across from Kern. Her face looked tight and drawn.

"Perhaps," Trooper said quietly. The paladin's eyes glinted like blue glass. "But then, not all secrets are meant to be shared."

The elf took a deep breath. "I think this one has to be." She smiled crookedly, her expression wistful. "I wish I could tell you this was all just another one of my practical jokes, but..." Her words faltered.

Kern ran a frustrated hand through his tangled red hair. He couldn't hold back any longer. "Listle, what was that creature? And why was it hunting you? And what... what happened when I tried to help you up?" His questions trailed off into awkward silence.

"I guess you haven't ever heard the phrase, 'One thing at a time,' have you, Kern?" Listle said wryly. "But that's all right. I'll try to tell you everything."

With a deep breath, she began her story.

"Kern already knows how, ten years ago, I escaped from the tower of the wizard Sifahir. Believe me when I say that there has never been an elvish mage as black-hearted as he was." Listle could not suppress a shudder. "Three centuries ago, he was counselor to the Queen of Evermeet, the land of the silver elves far across the Trackless Sea. For a time Sifahir used his powers to help the Queen keep her islands safe from pirates and sea monsters. But gradually he found other, less benevolent uses for his magic.

"With his spells, Sifahir would torture confessions of treason out of innocent elves, and wreak magical destruction upon villages that couldn't pay his cruel taxes. As time went on, his schemes grew ever darker. He began to whisper wicked plans of conquest in the queen's ear and to warn her of treacherous plots against her life concocted, so he said, by her closest friends and loved ones. He advised that she execute them all. Finally the queen realized his true evil. However, since it's against elven nature to take a life—even one as evil as Sifahir's—she exiled him to a small, barren island north of Evermeet."

The fire sent shadows dancing across Listle's face. Kern leaned forward to catch her soft words.

"The island Sifahir was exiled to was little more than a

collection of jagged rocks jutting up above the waves," the elf went on. "Despite his might, Sifahir was condemned to stay in that desolate place. The Queen of the silver elves is not without powerful enchantments herself, and she cast a geas upon him. Should he ever set foot off his island, he would perish. But if she thought this meant he would never be able to work evil in the world again, then the good Queen was wrong."

Listle shook her head sadly. "Sifahir raised a dark tower, and from it he spun a magical web, its tendrils reaching farther and farther with every passing year. He could never hope to leave the island, but with his evil web he was able to draw others to him. The unlucky would find their boats pulled off course to Sifahir's island, their vessels crashing to splinters on the rocky shore, stranding them. Then, as his power expanded, he discovered ways to create evil servants that could venture forth into the world to retrieve objects for him—books of arcane lore, objects of magical power, and even... other people."

She gazed at Kern. "That is what attacked me in the glen. One of Sifahir's servants. I... I never imagined one of his creatures could travel so far from his island prison."

She shook her head and went on. "With his web and his conjured minions, Sifahir captured and enslaved countless elves. The weaponsmith, Primul, was one of them, and the elven mages, Brookwine and Winebrook, were two more. Most of Sifahir's prisoners died in the course of his terrible experiments, but a few were kept alive to serve him."

"Like you, Listle?" Trooper asked gently.

She laughed then, but it was a rueful laugh, so unusual coming from the typically buoyant elf.

"No, Trooper," she said sorrowfully. "That wasn't the case with me. You see, I didn't come to the island." Anguish shone in her silver eyes. "The island was where I first came to be."

Realization struck Kern, cold and terrible. "He ... he created you, didn't he?" He could barely speak the words. "Sifahir

conjured you, just like he did the creature in the glen." He shook his head. "But that means you're ... you're a..."

She nodded, trembling. "An illusion, Kern. I began my existence as an illusion, conjured by Sifahir's magic to guard his treasure chamber."

Kern worked his jaw silently. What could he possibly say?

"But an illusion is simply an image," Trooper said with a bushy-eyebrowed scowl. "Illusions are nothing more than figments of the imagination. They cannot think, or act of their own free will. Or play practical jokes."

"No," Listle agreed, "they can't." She shivered, drawing closer to the fire. "I have only vague recollections of the time when I was created. More like dreams, really. I remember existing in Sifahir's treasure chamber. I would appear if intruders ventured within and use the magic Sifahir had granted me to confront them. There was never any conscious thought in my actions."

Her voice grew even more quiet, her gaze intent. "But then ... then something happened. What caused it to happen, I don't think I'll ever know. Perhaps it was simply the aura of magic that pervaded the treasure chamber, radiated by all the artifacts it contained. Whatever the cause, one day I realized that I had become conscious. I was fully aware of what I was—no, of who I was—and what I was doing.

"At first it was simply a curious, wonderful sensation. But as time went on, my sense of self grew stronger. I began to feel pity for the people I was forced to use my magic on, then grief. Finally, I too came to understand Sifahir's true nature and knew that I could serve him no longer. I decided to escape. It was the first independent decision I ever made."

She touched her ruby pendant, its light dormant now. "As the guardian of Sifahir's treasure, I knew each item, down to the least coin. This necklace was one of his most prized possessions. It was forged by gnome illusionists long ago and enhanced his magic greatly. But he did not understand all of its secrets. I sensed that it had the power to grant me

... life." She swallowed hard. "As long as I wore the necklace, my body would be no different than a living elf is."

"So you took the necklace and escaped from the tower," Miltiades said solemnly.

She nodded. "It was easy. Sifahir had never expected one of his own illusions to betray him. Since I could will myself to become insubstantial and pass through walls, I managed to free some of the prisoners—Primul and a few others locked in the dungeons. We fled through the tower's gates. That was where I discovered Winebrook and Brookwine. Their bodies were sunk deeply into the stone archway, where for years they had been forced to use their magic to strengthen the iron gate. I was able to reach into the stone and pull them free."

Her eyes grew distant "I remember that day so clearly. Primul picked up the two old mages as if they were thin sticks. They were so pale, so brittle. I didn't see how they could survive. We dashed through the gates and to the sea. Then I realized we had no way to escape the island. But somehow, despite their weakness, Brookwine and Winebrook sent forth a call, and a half-dozen dolphins lifted their heads above the waves. We dove into the water, and the dolphins bore us away from the island. By that point, bolts of green lightning were shooting from the tower's turrets. Too late, Sifahir had discovered our escape."

Listle's shoulders sagged. "The dolphins dropped us on the shores of Evermeet, and ever since we've all been fleeing from Sifahir's minions. He means to recapture us, and he wants me most of all." She fidgeted with her necklace. "It has been over three years since the last attack. I had started to think that maybe he had lost us forever. But I know now that I was wrong. Sifahir will never rest until he's regained the necklace and exacted his revenge."

"What will happen to you?" Kern found himself asking, almost against his will.

Listle stared at the others. "I'll become an illusion once

again."

A silence descended on the small clearing. Kern tried to sort out all Listle had told him. The elf had always been unpredictable, but this—this was unfathomable. A dozen emotions clashed in his heart. Sorrow that Listle had known such anguish. Anger at the evil mage that dogged her footsteps. Fear that the elf might vanish in a puff of smoke at any moment. But most of all, he felt a profound confusion. Only a short while ago, after she had kissed him, he had seen Listle in a whole new light. Feelings he had never imagined before had stirred in his heart. But now he didn't know what to feel. How could he love someone who wasn't even real?

Listle stood, her jaw set, with deep sorrow in her eyes. "I'm sorry I've lied to you all for so long. I... I can understand if you want me to leave." She started to gather her things.

"Listle, do not—" Miltiades began, but he was interrupted by two brilliant sparks of light floating into the clearing. Both were a shimmering aquamarine, though one spark was slightly more green than blue, and the other slightly more blue than green. Abruptly the sparks flashed, and in their place stood two ancient, sweet-faced elves.

"Brookwine! Winebrook!" Listle exclaimed.

Trooper raised a bushy eyebrow in surprise, casting a glance at Kern. Kern nodded, confirming the paladin's unspoken question. These were the two elven mages from Listle's story.

"Listle," Brookwine began in his tremulous voice, "we are so glad that we have—"

"—found you," Winebrook went on without pause. "Primul sent us to warn you that—"

"—one of Sifahir's minions has discovered your—"

"—whereabouts. You're in terrible—"

"—danger!" The two elves finished as one.

Listle sighed, reaching out and holding their fine-boned hands. "I know," she said glumly. "I was attacked a few hours

ago. But that particular beast will trouble us no more, thanks to my friends here."

Quickly she relayed the tale of their encounter with Sifahir's illusionary minion. When she finished, the two wispy mages bowed deeply to the others.

"We are most grateful for—"

"—your slaying of the beast—"

"—that sought to deliver us into—"

"—Sifahir's hands once again."

The elves smiled their beguiling smiles, eyes glowing green-blue and blue green.

"Er, don't mention it," Trooper said, seeming at a loss as he turned his gaze from one mage to the other.

"Can you stay a while?" Listle asked the two ancient mages hopefully, but Brookwine and Winebrook shook their heads.

"I'm afraid we dare not—"

"—linger, dear Listle. We must return to—"

"—inform Primul of this development," they said in their fluid manner.

"You know how the green elf thinks us—"

"—to be flighty, and how angry he—"

"—gets when we dilly—"

"—dally."

Listle laughed despite her recent ordeal. Seeing her old friends always lifted her heart, no matter the circumstances.

"Take care, you two," she whispered, hugging them tightly.

"And don't let Primul bully you." In a wink the mages vanished, and two glowing sparks fluttered out of the clearing.

Listle fell silent then. Her worst fears had been realized. Her secret had been revealed. She knew the others would never regard her the same way again, especially Kern.

Trooper spoke, as if sensing her thoughts. "Well, let's have no more talk of leaving tonight," he said testily. "It's too late for such serious matters, and this old man needs his sleep."

With that he rolled himself in his blanket and almost

instantly began snoring.

Listle saw Kern gazing at her, the expression in his eyes impossible to read. She took a hesitant step toward him, wishing he would say something . . . anything. For a moment she thought he was going to, but then he too turned away and, climbing into his bedroll, shut his eyes tightly.

Listle felt a preternatural chill behind her. She looked up to see Miltiades. The paladin seemed to be regarding her with his empty eyes.

"It is a burden, being so different, is it not?" he said softly in his eerie voice.

"Yes," she whispered. "It is."

"You must not despair, Listle Onopordum," he said, a stern note in his usually gentle voice. "You fought hard to have the chance to live. Do not throw it away, for any reason."

With that the skeletal knight stepped away into the shadows, leaving her feeling completely and utterly alone.

* * * * *

A scream of rage filled the cavern of the pool of twilight.

"Why did you not tell me that sunlight would destroy my beautiful shadow fiends?" Sirana ranted. Her lovely hands were clenched into claws, her misshapen face twisted even more grotesquely than usual.

Was it not obvious? the guardian of the pool asked mockingly. They were creatures of darkness. How could they possibly withstand the burning rays of the sun?

Sirana's wings flapped violently, casting off spatters of greasy black feathers. "Tell me, great guardian of the pool," she spoke acidly. "You, who promised me so much power. Tell me, why does my revenge yet go unfulfilled?"

Bubbles burst sluggishly on the pool's metallic surface. As I told you long ago, sorceress, you are dealing with powerful forces. There is only one way you will ever gain the power you need to exact your vengeance. Sparkling flecks of twilight appeared in the pool, swirling at its center. You must enter the pool....

Sirana shook her head, though entranced by the specks dancing beneath the pool's surface, even as similar sparks swirled beneath her dusky skin. She knew she must not enter the pool of twilight. To do so would mean imprisonment beneath its murky depths.

But, she mused, wouldn't it be worth the price, to finally gain sufficient power to exact her revenge?

Sirana had no idea if that stray thought was her own or the guardian's. The flecks of twilight swirled faster, becoming a hypnotic whirlpool.

Wouldn't entering the pool be worth the small sacrifice? She could avenge her father's death and bring about the destruction of that wretched city, Phlan, once and for all.

Slowly, she began to approach the edge of the pool.

It wasn't as if she would have to be the pool's guardian forever, she reminded herself. She had only to wait until the first unwary traveler happened upon the cavern. How easy it would be, to convince some lesser being to enter the pool's depths.

Sirana balanced on the rocky edge. The turgid water lapped mere inches below her clawed feet.

Come, sorceress. Is not vengeance worthwhile, whatever the cost?

"Yes," she whispered, the swirling flecks of twilight reflected in her blankly staring eyes. "I must have my vengeance."

Sirana plunged into the pool of twilight

She felt as if she were freezing into ice and burning to ashes all at once. The thick fluid dragged her body down. Sparks flashed in front of her eyes; the lack of oxygen seared her lungs. She clamped her mouth shut, fighting the urge to draw a breath. Oh, why had she done this foolish thing? Her consciousness began to grow faint.

Finally she could stand it no longer. She opened her mouth, filling her lungs with the pool's water in one horrible, shuddering breath.

She was not drowning!

She took another breath of the thick, metallic water, and another, and another. With each, she felt incredible energy pulsing through her veins, infusing every fiber of her being. The power she had experienced before was nothing compared to the primal magic she now felt coursing through her body, forging her anew into something awesome and terrible, into ...

... the guardian of the pool.

Even as Sirana reveled in her new incarnation, the waters of the pool began to froth and bubble furiously. In a spray of shimmering foam, a huge creature burst forth from its waters and soared toward the heights of the cavern.

"Free!" a wild, thunderous voice trumpeted. "After all these centuries, at last I am free!"

The massive creature whirled about the cavern, stretching his midnight wings in ecstasy. The black dragon was a great, ancient beast armored with countless scales as hard and gleaming as onyx. The dragon's name was Dusk, and in all the northlands of Faerun there was not an older or more powerful creature of his kind. A full two hundred feet from his horned snout to the spike-studded tip of his tail, there was strength enough in his claws to rend mountains to dust. The dragon alighted beside the pool. One of his black eyes shone in utter satisfaction, while the other was dim and clouded, blinded by an ancient but not forgotten wound. That foolish half-fiend, Sirana, had finally yielded to the temptation the dragon had dangled before her. Now she would be the pool's guardian, trapped in its silvery waters. Now Dusk would do what Sirana had been too weak and moronic to accomplish—completely and utterly destroy the abominable city of Phlan!

Memories flickered through Dusk's mind.

Three centuries ago he had ruled the skies over the Moonsea. All the cities along the coast had lived in fear of his shadow. Dusk had plundered wherever he went, amassing a hoard of riches that made the treasure of a

hundred kings pale in significance.

Then he had devised his most brilliant plan.

He flew from mountain peak to mountain peak, from ruin to ruin, speaking with the other evil dragons that lived along the shores of the Moonsea. With sly, cunning words, he played upon the hatred that all dragons felt for human, dwarven, and elvenkind. He lit a spark in the hearts of the evil dragons—red, blue, green, and black—until that spark grew into a burning wildfire. One dark dawn, a hundred dragons flew from their hidden lairs to join his army and fight as one, assailing all the lands around the Moonsea.

Thus began the first dragon-rage.

Folk cowered in their cities as destruction rained down from above. Fire and acid, lightning and poisonous clouds, mayhem and devastation. Dragon wings blotted out the sun, and dragon roars boomed like thunder. It was glorious. And Dusk was the most magnificent of them all. The other dragons looked to him as their exalted leader. The tribute they had agreed to pay would make him lord over a mountain of treasure such as Faerun had never seen.

Or it would have come to pass, had it not been for Andehar Longarm.

Andehar was the latest in Phlan's irksomely endless supply of champions. Heroes seemed to breed like lice in that wretched city. Just as the dragon-rage was nearing the peak of its frenzy, Dusk had made the mistake of flying too close to Phlan's walls. Standing atop the city's battlements, Andehar had loosed an enchanted arrow from his bow. Guided by magic, the barbed shaft had struck Dusk in his left eye.

Dusk had never known such agony. He had spun wildly through the air, blinded by the pain. He fell to the ground and crawled away. Without his leadership, the evil dragons began to bicker among themselves. Hatred and suspicion flared. The dragon-rage descended into chaos as the wyrms sped back to guard their lairs from each other, leaving Dusk

to flee abjectly to the mountains. He never forgot the cheers rising from the walls of Phlan, and he had vowed to exact his vengeance upon that blasted city and all of the vile folk that inhabited it.

Dusk had limped into a cavern deep in the Dragonspine Mountains, intent upon licking his wounds until he gathered the strength once again to assault Phlan. But he had not counted on the pool of twilight. He had stumbled upon it by accident, and in his delirium of pain and anger had succumbed to the tempting offers of power made to him by the storm giant who was the pool's guardian. Dusk had agreed to enter the pool in the hope of gaining the power he needed to recuperate and wreak the ultimate vengeance. The storm giant had been freed—while Dusk found himself trapped.

Over time, Dusk had discovered he could use the power of the pool to compel the multitudes of monsters that inhabited the mountains to do his bidding. All it took were a few droplets from the pool mixed with the underground streams that flowed below the cavern. Once the streams passed into the outside world, all manner of creatures drank from their waters, thus falling under Dusk's sway. Over the centuries, he had amassed great hordes of creatures and sent them to attack Phlan. Time and time again the monsters failed, dying by the thousands against Phlan's stubborn walls. Eventually Dusk realized that there was only one way he could destroy Phlan. He had to launch a new dragon-rage.

And now that he was finally free, he could do just that. Only this time he would not send a hundred dragons against the cities of the Moonsea. He would send a thousand! He would not be simply a prince of his kind, or even a king. He would be an emperor of dragons, and all the lands around the Moonsea would cower in fear before him.

Dusk unfolded his huge, shadowy wings, exulting at the glorious victory that would soon be his. Ah, but first he had

to say a fond good-bye to Sirana. As the pool's new guardian, it would be her honor to grant him the power he needed to summon the evil wyrms for a new dragon-rage.

"Sirana!" he called out. "Heed my call!"

Why should I, wyrm? the sorceress's voice echoed in his mind with a sound like laughter. It was clear she was enjoying her newfound status as the pool's guardian and was intoxicated by the incredible power. Sirana was even more of a fool than Dusk had imagined.

The dragon grinned evilly, displaying row after row of daggerlike teeth. "Obey my wishes, sorceress, or I will pulverize the mountains, sealing this cavern under so much rubble that it will never be discovered. You will remain here, imprisoned, forever."

He could feel fury radiating from the pool, along with just a hint of fear. His feral grin widened. She would be forced to serve him.

Very well, she replied sullenly. What do you wish, wyrm?

"Don't call me that!" he hissed dangerously. He crawled toward the edge of the pool, seeing his dark and sinuous beauty reflected in its surface. "Now, grant me power enough to summon a thousand dragons."

I will grant you what I can. But I must retain enough power for myself so that I can create a new army to send against Phlan.

The dragon roared with laughter. "Believe me, sorceress, nothing you can do while trapped within the pool will be enough to destroy that city. I have tried myself a hundred times over."

He felt disbelief radiate from the pool. "But do not fear," he continued wickedly. "Once the dragon-rage has begun, Phlan will be blasted off the face of Toril. We will both have our revenge!" His one good eye glinted sharply. "Now, sorceress, grant me the power of the pool."

As you wish.

A dully shining tendril lifted itself from the surface of the

pool. It reached toward Dusk, coiling about his body. The dragon threw his head back in a roar as the tendril tightened about him. He felt the pool's magic flowing into him.

"More!" he screamed, wings beating. "More!"

Finally the tendril slipped back into the pool. Dusk stumbled backward, his head reeling. Ah, but it was exquisite! To be free, and so full of power!

Deep within the pool, Sirana laughed smugly to herself. Like everything, even laughing was a new, exciting experience. All sense of her own body was gone now. Her senses seemed to mingle with the waters of the pool. The vast amount of magical energy she had just granted Dusk was but a fraction of the entire source.

So in all these centuries, with all the might of the pool at his beck and call, the stupid dragon could not manage to destroy Phlan? Bah! Let the wyrm try his dragon-rage, thought Sirana. By the time he arrives at Phlan, he will find it a smoking ruin.

She felt certain that she would succeed first where the dragon had failed. Without the Hammer of Tyr, Phlan had fallen into dark decay. The walls crumbled in disrepair, and the Death Gates hung open on their hinges—practically an invitation for an army of destruction to enter.

Now all Sirana had to do was to create that army.

With all the pool's power flowing through her, she cast forth a summons. It vibrated through the bedrock, pulsing out in waves, spreading throughout the Dragonspine Mountains. Scant seconds later, the first to heed her call shuffled into the cavern.

A motley throng of dull-eyed creatures approached the pool: bears and elk, eagles and snakes, insects and worms. There were monsters as well: goblins, orcs, owlbears, gnolls, and giants. Among them too were humans, dwarves, and even elves.

All of them were dead.

Some were only in the first stages of decay, their pallid skin

mostly unblemished, covered with fine, moist bits of leaf litter. Others were riddled with worm-eaten holes, their swollen flesh dripping off their bodies in gobbets. All lurched toward the pool, compelled by her call.

Without the slightest hesitation, the zombies toppled over the pool's edge, submerging themselves in the metallic waters. In new, horrible forms they clambered clumsily out the opposite side. A rotting goblin with hissing zombie snakes sprouting from its eye sockets was the first. Then came a dwarf with a screaming eagle's claws sunk deep into its shoulders. A pixie stumbled out, black widow spiders bobbing from threads attached to its hands. A slack-jawed deer staggered to its feet, a dozen decomposing badgers skewered upon its antlers, snapping and hissing. A bow-wielding elf fused to the shoulders of a hill giant was followed by a gnome covered with undead stinging insects. An orc sprouted from the back of a mountain lion. The gaping, fang-toothed maw of a wolf, snapping violently, was embedded in the chest of a human man. More and more abominations climbed out of the pool's waters in a steady stream.

And still more.

Sirana's laughter bubbled to the surface of the pool. Phlan would never stand against her army of zombie abominations! She intensified her summons, compelling yet more putrid corpses to lurch into motion and begin their trek toward the pool of twilight.

Disgusted by the reek of Sirana's vile creations, Dusk turned to slither down a passageway. Despite his vast size, his sinuous body glided easily through the twists and turns. He sensed the nearness of the outside, and, in a spray of stone and rubble, he burst through a wall of rock. Like a black comet, he soared through the air, winging high over the jagged mountains.

Ah, to fly free once again!

For a while, he simply wheeled through the air, pumping his

great, dark wings, thrilled by long-forgotten sensations. But his purpose burned within him. He had all the power he needed from the pool. Now, to seek out the other evil dragons of the Moonsea, and once again fan the spark of hatred in their hearts.

As he flew over the mountains, there was no way Dusk could have known that brilliant, twilight-colored flecks of light danced in his one good eye.

17

The Wild Gift

The frigid wind whipped through Daile's hair as her magic carpet sped through the air high above the Dragon-spine Mountains. She knew she should stop and make camp. It was reckless to fly so fast in the darkness. Several times she had narrowly avoided pinnacles of rock looming before her or the outstretched branches of tall trees. But still she gripped the carpet's tassels, guiding it onward. She had barely paused in her journey since leaving the Valley of the Falls two days ago. Not that it had been easy to leave. No, she thought ruefully. Leaving had been the hardest thing she had ever done.

Her mind drifted back to that cold, gray day. She had buried Ren in a cairn of stones next to Ciela, below the glittering, frozen cathedral of the waterfall. After she had placed the last rock on the cairn, she simply sat there and stared at the motionless water, not knowing what to do. She had never felt so utterly alone.

In her gloom, she almost hadn't seen see the trio of orcs that crept into the clearing behind her. But at the last moment, she'd caught a reflection of the pig-snouted creatures in the glassy surface of the waterfall. She'd whirled around as the orcs bared their yellowed tusks and drew their rusted short swords. Then the bloodthirsty monsters had charged.

In the space of a heartbeat, Daile had raised her bow, and, with icy calm, loosed three arrows in rapid succession. The orcs had dropped in their tracks, looks of dull-witted

astonishment on their warty faces, each with a red-feathered arrow protruding from its throat.

Daile had lowered her bow, feeling a strange warmth surging through her blood. It was as if the attack had broken her from the grip of a spell. For the next three days she'd prowled the valley from end to end, from river to ridge top, searching. Every creature of evil she found had fallen prey to her arrows. Orcs, kobolds, even trolls were her quarry. All that filled her mind was the hunt. She had stalked the forest, as if it were her natural home, and she a hunter born to the wild.

Finally there had been no more monsters to slay.

Those few that might have remained had heard of her deadly bow and fled. Daile had returned to the small stone keep as a great weariness came over her. She'd slept for a day and a night, and when she woke, it was again as if waking from a spell. What had happened to her? She had almost. .. lost herself to the wilds. How much longer could it have gone on before she became the same as any beast?

She'd shuddered, vowing never to lose control of herself like that again.

Suddenly thoughts of Kern and the others had come crashing down on her; she had tarried too long. With one last glance at the valley that had been her home, she had leaped on the magic carpet and soared into the sky....

Finally Daile realized she could keep her eyes open no longer. She had to stop and rest for just a few hours, until the dawn. Then she would be on her way again. She pulled on the golden tassels, and the carpet began to descend.

A glimmer of light caught her eye.

It quickly vanished, but a moment later she saw it again. A small, warm spark dancing in a dark grove of trees. Someone was down there!

Instantly, all thoughts of sleep vanished from Daile's mind. She jerked hard on the tassels, and the carpet sped toward the firelight.

As she drew closer, she could make out two figures in the flickering circle. Quickly, she dug in her pack and pulled out the cylindrical scrying glass that had been her father's. When she lifted it to her eyes, her heart leaped in her chest. Evaine and Gamaliel! The long-haired sorceress lay near the fire, her eyes closed in sleep, while the tawny cat sat on his haunches, keeping watch. Daile grinned exultantly. She started to lower the scrying glass, then suddenly halted.

A third figure had drifted into the clearing.

It was a thing of shadows. All she could make out were sharp, moon-bright teeth and countless twiglike fingers. She drew in a sharp breath. Whatever it was, it was heading straight for Evaine. The great cat was staring into the night, seemingly oblivious to the intruder.

"Come on, Gamaliel," Daile whispered.

But the cat did not stir as the shadow creature reached its long arms toward Evaine. Even as Daile watched through the scrying glass, the creature's spindly fingers touched the sorceress's brow. Evaine shuddered in her sleep. Gamaliel turned his head, as if sensing something was wrong, but it was clear that for some reason he could not see the creature. Daile knew she had to act. As the carpet sailed toward the clearing, she hastily set down the scrying glass and reached for her bow, but by the time she looked up, the shadow creature was gone!

She shook her head. How could the thing have disappeared so suddenly? She lifted the scrying glass again to be sure.

No, the shadow creature still cradled Evaine's head in its hands, baring fangs in a milk-white grin.

Daile realized the truth: the scrying glass must be enchanted. That was why she could see the shadow creature. Gamaliel was not to blame. It was up to her to save Evaine.

Hastily she set the scrying glass aside and raised her bow. "If there is a way to wound a shadow, bow, show me what it is," she whispered fiercely.

The magical weapon quivered in her hands, the two ioun stones set into its wood humming brightly. Suddenly scarlet flames crackled along the arrow. The crimson bolt streaked through the air. It passed a scant foot above Evaine's sleeping form—and stopped in midair.

The great cat leaped to his feet at this strange sight.

"Gamaliel, Evaine is being attacked!" Daile shouted. Even as her words rang out, scarlet tongues of fire radiated from the arrow, outlining a writhing form. The shadow creature. With the aid of the magical fire, Daile and Gamaliel could see the thing clearly. It had lifted its twig-fingers from Evaine and was scrabbling at the arrow protruding from its chest. Gamaliel lunged toward the thing, fangs bared. He snarled and leaped back as crimson fire seared his muzzle. The shadow creature grabbed at the cat with its branchlike arms, ready to sink its needle fangs into Gamaliel's flesh.

"One more time, bow," Daile whispered. Another blazing arrow plunged into the shadow monster. With a cry, the creature released Gamaliel and backed away, clawing at the arrow sunk into its eyeless face. Slowly, it lowered to the ground. The scarlet flames dimmed and vanished. Daile found that she could see the creature now, a motionless pool of shadow on the ground.

Daile was about to call out to Gamaliel when the carpet lurched violently.

The ranger swore. She hadn't been paying attention! There was a loud noise as the carpet snagged a tree branch, then Daile felt herself falling. Fortunately, a thick bed of pine needles cushioned her impact. Gamaliel helped her to her feet, and as he did so, she realized he had metamorphosed into his human shape. He regarded her curiously. Scorch marks covered his arms where the magical flame from her arrows had burned him.

"Gamaliel, your wounds—"

He waved her words aside. "It is nothing," he said gruffly.

"Your arrows saved us. Come, we must see to Evaine."

The sorceress was already awake, though it was clear she was weak and dizzy. Whatever the creature was, it had obviously drained her with its deadly touch.

"I don't know how or why you found us, Daile," she said with a faint smile. "But your timing is impeccable."

Stiffly, she knelt to examine the pile of dark tatters, all that remained of the creature. "I've heard of beings that feed upon their victims' dreams." Evaine sighed wearily. "This explains why I've felt so hollow and dispirited these last days."

"And I never suspected anything," Gamaliel said quietly. There was anger in his voice, as well as anguish.

"Don't you dare be so foolish as to blame yourself, Gam," Evaine said sternly. "There was no way you could have known." She turned her gaze toward the ranger. "You picked a good night to find us, Daile. For six nights I've been growing weaker and weaker. Tonight would have been the seventh. After tonight, I might have become one of those creatures myself."

Daile stared in horror at the sorceress. There was nothing she could say. Evaine reached out and gripped her hand.

"Thank you," the sorceress said.

They spent the remainder of the night close to the fire, each telling what had befallen them since they had parted company at Evaine's dwelling. The sorceress brewed a pot of herbal tea that would help restore her strength and offered a cup to the ranger. Daile sipped the fragrant liquid, gathering her thoughts. She told the tale of their journey to the ruins of the red tower, describing how Kern had fought the osyluth and gained the Hammer of Tyr. She dreaded having to tell the story of her father's death once again, of having to relive that terrible moment Evaine had been one of Ren's best friends; she deserved to know. Her brown eyes distant, Daile began to describe Ren's fatal battle with the knight-fiend. When she finished, she was surprised to realize that, somehow, it hadn't been quite as painful reliving the

memory this time.

"I will miss him," Evaine said with a deep sigh. "But Faerun is a better place because of Ren o' the Blade, and a brighter place. His life had meaning, great meaning. It was all he would have wished. Don't ever forget that, Daile."

Daile knew that she would not.

Evaine was told all about the young archer's adventures, including the tale of Sirana's treachery and how the wild mage was in truth a half-fiend, the daughter of the Red Wizard Marcus.

"She's in league with the pool of twilight, Evaine. That's what the others were coming to warn you about."

The sky had steadily brightened as they spoke, and now the ruddy orb of the sun lifted itself above the snowcapped heights. As the first rays filtered their way into the clearing, the remains of the dreamstalker began to smoke and bubble, evaporating before their eyes. In moments, there was no trace of the shadow creature left.

They broke camp in the morning light. Evaine was still weak, her cheeks hollow and sunken, but now that the nightly attacks had ended, she thought she would quickly regain strength.

The first thing to do was to locate Kern and the others. How to go about it was a dilemma. It was possible that Evaine could cast one of her search spells, but that would have to be a last resort. The sorceress needed to save her spell components—and her energy—to find the pool of twilight.

"I could have used the magic carpet to scout the area," Daile said, "but..."

She didn't need to say the obvious. The tattered remains of the carpet were tangled in the branches of a nearby tree twenty feet above the ground. The magic carpet would fly no more.

Gamaliel turned to Daile. "Perhaps there is another way you might scout above the trees." There was a peculiar intensity in the barbarian's green-gold eyes.

"How?" Daile asked wryly. "Am I supposed to flap my arms and fly into the air?"

"Perhaps I mean just that, ranger."

Daile frowned. What was Gamaliel talking about?

"Gamaliel," Evaine said seriously. "Are you certain this is wise?"

The barbarian shrugged. "She must discover the gift someday, Evaine. Why not now, when it can be of use?"

Evaine looked skeptical, but did not disagree.

Daile regarded them both in bewilderment. "What are you talking about?"

Gamaliel reached out and took her hand. "Come. I'll show you."

He led her into the woods. Daile wondered why Evaine did not follow. Perhaps the sorceress needed to rest, she thought.

Gamaliel stopped when they reached the edge of a steep precipice. Rugged, pristine wilderness stretched as far as Daile could see, forested ridges gilded by the morning light. The sight tugged at her heart. It was a feeling she had experienced before, hunting with her father or stalking orcs in the Valley of the Falls, a desire to make herself one with the forest, the mountains, and the sky.

"It is the wild gift," Gamaliel stated in answer to her thoughts.

"I don't understand," Daile said, shaking her head.

"I have sensed it in you," the barbarian explained in his rich voice. "You move through the forest as if it is your home. You do not try to master it. Rather, you become part of it, sensing its sights and scents as if it is second nature for you." He laid both his strong hands on her shoulders. "The wild gift runs in your blood, Daile. Do you choose to accept it?"

The barbarian's words sent a strange thrill through her. She wasn't at all certain what Gamaliel was talking about, but somehow she knew he spoke the truth. The wind blew his

golden hair from his square, chiseled face.

"Yes," she whispered before she really knew what she was saying. The wilderness did call to her.

Gamaliel nodded, a pleased look in his eyes.

"Close your eyes," he said, leading her closer to the edge of the cliff. "I will help you."

She did as he instructed.

"Can you hear the wind?" he murmured softly.

"Yes," she whispered. She could hear the voice of the morning breeze, singing through the ghost-pale aspen frees.

"Listen to its music," Gamaliel instructed. "Let it blow over you, and through you. Now breathe. Breathe deeply. What do you smell?"

"The forest," Daile answered. Though her eyes were shut, she felt acutely aware of everything around her. "I can smell the sun warming the granite of the cliff. There's a wolverine's den nearby, and a group of white-tail deer even closer. And I smell snowcress growing beside a frozen spring not far behind us."

Gamaliel nodded in satisfaction. "Good, Daile. Now, let yourself be part of all that you sense. Let the wind lift you from your body. Let it shape you into something new. Something wondrous."

At first it was improbable. Daile felt so human, so rooted to the ground. But gradually she began to lighten, to feel as if the morning wind was flowing through her. And suddenly she felt... different indeed.

"That's it, Daile!" Gamaliel whispered intently. "Let the wilderness influence you. There is something within you, trying to break out to answer the call. Let yourself be free."

Yes, be free, Daile said to herself. Exultation washed through her. The sounds and scents of the woodlands were overpowering, intoxicating. She felt as if she was falling through air.

"Open your eyes, Daile Redfletching!"

Gamaliel's shout sounded oddly distant. Daile opened her

eyes. Wonder filled her.

She was flying.

She stretched her wings, feeling the air rush over her feathers. She laughed for joy, and the sound came out as the high, piercing cry of a hawk. She beat her wings, soaring on an updraft, and wheeled high in the sky. She saw Gamaliel below her, shading his eyes with a hand as he grinned up at her. Then in a flash the barbarian was gone, and the tawny great cat was bounding through the forest.

She followed him, marveling at the way her wings guided her on the swirling currents of air. Her sharp eyes caught glimpses of Gamaliel loping gracefully among the trees below, and she pumped her wings, easily keeping pace with him.

A silver lake flashed beneath her, and for a moment she caught a glimpse of a red-gold hawk with red bands on the tips of its wings. It was only after a moment that she realized it was a reflection of herself. Rainbow-sided trout leaped in the cold water. She had the urge to swoop down and snatch one in her outstretched talons. But Gamaliel's snarl caught her attention. She flew after him.

Her vision amazed her. She could see a mouse cowering under a pile of dead leaves and the gossamer strands of a spider's web glistening in a tree a league away. She wheeled gracefully in the azure sky. In moments she saw them. Four travelers just breaking camp in a forested bowl a few leagues to the south.

There was Kern, saddling his horse, and Listle and Miltiades packing their gear. There was another with them, an old man Daile did not recognize, but by the scales of justice engraved on the hilt of his sword, she knew him to be a venerable paladin.

She cried out, letting Gamaliel know that she had seen them. The cat bounded back toward camp, and Daile followed. Moments later she swooped down and perched on a branch near Evaine. She began to explain that she had

seen Kern.

The sorceress regarded her curiously. "I can't understand hawk speech very well, Daile," Evaine said dryly. "Could you try Common, please?"

Suddenly the branch beneath Daile buckled. She fell to the ground with a thump.

"It would probably be better if you landed on the ground next time before transforming back into human form," Gamaliel noted as he shifted into his barbarian shape and stepped into the clearing.

Daile nodded in agreement as she stood, rubbing her sore backside. Quickly she relayed to Evaine what she had seen, and they hastily broke camp. If they marched swiftly, they might intercept their friends by noon.

Once they were on their way, her head reeled. Had it not been for Gamaliel's strong grip on her arm, Daile might have tripped and fallen as the full implications of what happened washed over her.

"Gamaliel," she began hesitantly, "how... how did I do that?"

"As I told you," he said gravely, "it is the wild gift, a legacy from Ciela, your druidess mother. She had the gift, as many druids do, though I do not think it ran so strongly in her blood as yours." Gamaliel smiled, then his face grew solemn.

"It is a remarkable talent, Daile. But you must take care. Sometimes ... sometimes those whose blood sings with the wild gift can become lost in it. The call of the wilderness becomes so overpowering, it drowns out all other thoughts and desires."

Daile shivered. She thought she knew what he meant.

"Always remember, Daile, that when you become a hawk, you must lock a part of yourself away in a corner of your mind, a part that remembers what it is to be a human."

"What would happen if I didn't?" she asked.

"Then you would forget you were once a woman, and you would become a hawk forever."

With that, Gamaliel moved swiftly through the trees after

Evaine. Daile hesitated a moment and followed, thinking of the way her hunt for creatures of evil had nearly consumed her in the Valley of the Falls. For those three days after burying Ren, she had thought of nothing but the hunt, as if she were an animal. She had almost lost herself, she knew now.

She shivered. "I will never forget that I am human," she whispered fiercely. "Never again." She hurried to catch up with the sorceress and barbarian.

* * * * *

The crystal resting in Evaine's brazier flared brightly, then flashed into dust. Her locating spell was complete. The sorceress's eyes flew open.

"I've found it!"

She stood weakly. The sun was fast sinking toward the western mountains, and the companions had made camp in a grove of ancient fir trees.

"The pool of twilight?" Kern asked, unconsciously gripping the haft of the Hammer of Tyr.

"No, Kern, she means the button she lost from her tunic last tenday," Listle replied, rolling her eyes. Despite the elf's usual flippant humor, her delicate face was wan and tight.

Evaine sat on a log near the crackling campfire. She, Gamaliel, and Daile had found Kern and the others on a windswept pass around midday. The reunion had been a joyous one. It had been good to see that Kern and Listle were well. And Miltiades.

There had also been a new introduction, but Evaine found that she was already enjoying Trooper's company—as well as the old paladin's tongue, which was as sharp as his rune sword and wielded with similar dexterity.

"Yes, Kern, the pool of twilight," Evaine said. She threw a handful of crystal dust into the campfire. The flames flared higher, an image appearing within. A pinnacle of dark stone with a distinctive cloven summit was revealed. At its base was the dark opening of a cave. "Always before, the

mountains interfered with my locating spell. But this time we are finally close enough. I have a solid fix on it. This spire is located in a valley no more than a dozen leagues from here. And the pool of twilight lies beneath. But..."

"But what, Evaine?" Miltiades asked when the sorceress paused.

Her face turned grim. "This time, when I detected the pool, I sensed a dangerous change in it. The guardian Shal and I encountered was no longer there. Instead, there was a new... presence. One even more evil than the last."

"Sirana," Kern growled.

Evaine nodded. "Yes, it could be that she controls the pool now."

Kern stood, regarding the others. "You should stay here. Tomorrow, I'll journey to the valley alone. After all, it's the hammer she wants to get her hands on. I'll confront her in the cave and—"

"And get burned to a crisp, Son?" Trooper snorted. The old paladin's eyes flashed like steel against stone. "I don't know where you got the notion that foolishness is akin to heroism, but you would do well to use that hammer of yours to knock the idea out of your head." He tugged at his beard in agitation. "Go to the pool alone? You might as well hand this Sirana the hammer on a silver platter. Fine lot of good your heroics would do us. Sirana would have the hammer, you'd end up a pile of ashes, and I'd have been wasting my time trying to turn you into a real paladin." He poked a bony finger at Kern's breastplate. "And I don't have much time to waste any more!"

Kern stared at the paladin, much chastened.

"What Trooper means to say, Kern," Miltiades went on in a more gentle tone, "is that we are all in this quest together and that as a group we are stronger than any one of us alone."

Trooper opened his mouth to point out that this was not at all what he had meant, but a glare from Miltiades' empty eye

sockets snapped his mouth shut. He didn't suppose there was much point in arguing with a dead man.

It was settled. The company of seven would set out for the pool together, and with any luck they would reach it by late tomorrow.

Suddenly, the westering light of the sun dimmed as a shadow passed overhead. All looked up to see a vast creature of darkness soaring high over the mountains. A black dragon.

Kern had seen a dragon once before, and at the time he had thought it a magnificent and fearsome sight. But that wyrm had been little more than an overgrown lizard with wings compared to the gigantic, bat-winged creature that blotted out the sun now. The beast soared on the wind, stretching its long, sinuous neck, as if it flew with great purpose. In moments it disappeared behind a mountain and was lost to sight.

"This is an ill omen," Trooper muttered.

"You don't think Sirana could have summoned it, do you?" Listle asked Evaine.

The sorceress shook her head. "I don't know."

"If she did, then we might as well pack up and go home now," Trooper grumbled. "I recognize that dragon from legends. Its name is Dusk, and there isn't a black dragon in all the northlands as big, as powerful, and as evil." He scratched his beard thoughtfully.

"Where do you suppose it was going?" Daile asked, wishing the beast had flown close enough to make a target for her arrows. She considered transforming into her hawk shape to pursue it. It was tempting ... But no, that would be a fool's errand. She shook the thought from her head.

"It flies south," Gamaliel growled.

"Phlan," was all Kern said.

* * * * *

Miltiades kept watch in the night.

He stood on a low spur of granite, thirty paces from the

sleeping figures huddled around the campfire. He knew that the preternatural chill he eternally emanated only added to the winter cold. It was hard enough for the others to get warm as it was. He did not wish to compound the problem. Besides, he did not need the fire to warm his bones, nor the light to see.

Although, sometimes, he did miss the companionship.

But it was not his fate to make friends. Tyr had raised him once more from the grave for one purpose only—to see Phlan restored. He knew this should gratify him. But he felt a hunger deep in his bones all the same. There was so much in the life he had lived long ago that remained unfulfilled.

Once he had been steward and protector of the city of Turell. For long years the city dwelled in peace. Then an evil wizard called Zarl set his sights upon it. Again and again, Miltiades and the folk of Turell were forced to turn back Zarl's magical hordes. Yet the wizard himself never rode into battle. Thus, he always survived to raise another army of darkness.

Finally, Miltiades decided to take by stealth what he was denied in honorable battle. He stole into Zarl's camp and slew the wizard. But in turn Miltiades was discovered and slain by the wizard's servants. Then the evil horde marched to Turell, taking the city apart stone by stone. For a thousand years, Miltiades had lain in his tomb, shunned by his god, Tyr, for his dishonorable act.

Then, some twenty-two years ago, Tyr had raised the paladin from the grave, giving him a chance to redeem himself. His quest was to restore the city of Phlan. After he had helped rescue the city from its imprisonment beneath the Red Wizard's tower, Miltiades had returned to a more peaceful slumber in his crypt. But his mission was not over. Phlan would never truly be restored until the Hammer of Tyr was returned. Thus Tyr had raised him once again, to aid Kern on his quest to return the hammer to Phlan.

Now that quest was finally near an end, for good or ill. Either way, Miltiades knew he would return to the grave once more.

This time forever.

Yet vows he had made in life went unkept. Even though Turell's stones had long since turned to dust, the vows still bound him. He had sworn to protect the powerful secrets concealed beneath the city of Turell. True, the city was no more and the hidden chambers might never be found, but then again, some unlucky being might stumble upon them tomorrow. And then the entire continent of Faerun would be in peril.

"If only I had more time," Miltiades said softly to the night, "to make certain the secrets are safe."

"What secrets, Miltiades?" a voice asked gently.

He turned to see a figure step out of the shadows. Long hair glistened in the moonlight. Evaine. Her green eyes regarded him intelligently.

Slowly he shook his head. "Old secrets, Evaine. Secrets that are no doubt long buried and lost forever. I should not concern myself with them, but sometimes it is hard for the dead to forget what they did in life, even if it is no longer important."

Evaine gave him a thoughtful look. "If it concerns you, Miltiades, I somehow doubt that it is truly unimportant."

She took a step closer to him. Suddenly aware that his bony visage must glow lividly in the moonlight, he reached up to lower his visor.

"Don't," she said.

He halted, then nodded. "As you wish. Perhaps it is best. This way you will see me for what I am."

Evaine crossed her arms against the cold, laughing softly. "Oh, I know very well what you are, Miltiades. A man of great strength and greater gentleness. A man fierce in battle, but kinder than he is fierce. And above all a man with wisdom enough to see his own weaknesses and to forgive the weaknesses he sees in others."

Her words surprised him. For a moment, he almost felt a spark of warmth inside his empty rib cage. But no, that was

impossible.

"I always hoped that someday I would meet a man like you, Miltiades," she went on softly. She shook her head ruefully. "I just forgot to hope that he would be alive when I did."

"I'm sorry," he said. It was all he could think of to say.

She gave him a sharp look. "I've told you once not to be sorry, Miltiades. I'll say it again. Don't be." She sighed, brushing her long hair from her face. "You have your vows to keep, and I have mine. I don't suppose there's much room for anything else in our lives."

He nodded in understanding. The two stood in silence for a long while, gazing into the night. When Evaine saw a shooting star, she didn't even think to make a wish.

18

The Forces of Twilight

Anton stood atop the temple of Tyr's highest rampart in the steely light of predawn, gazing into the distance. He was watching. And waiting.

Three hours earlier, Sister Sendara had woken him in the deep of night.

"This is the day our fate will be decided," the ancient priestess had whispered in the chilly darkness.

At those words, dread had clutched Anton's heart, but he had pushed the feeling aside. Quickly, he had donned his robe and hurried into the temple's main hall, striking a bronze gong to wake the other clerics. In the dark before the dawn, he told his brothers and sisters of Sendara's warning. In the hours since, the clerics of Tyr had done what they could to ready themselves and the temple for the coming onslaught, whatever form it might take.

As Anton watched, the baleful eye of the sun heaved itself above the frozen plains, spilling its bloody light across the city. Gazing into the west, he saw a dark stain spreading across the horizon. Even as he watched, the thing grew larger, a vast, undulating sea approaching the city's walls. His sharp eyes could just make out the twisted forms that

shambled in the fore of the black tide.

"Zombies," Anton murmured. "An army of zombies."

He did not hesitate. He lifted a polished, silver-tipped ox horn that hung from a strap about his neck and sounded a long, clear note. The alarm rang out across the city.

As it did, the scene erupted in chaos.

Folk streamed into the streets. Word of the approaching army of doom had spread like wildfire. Now people shoved past each other in an effort to flee the city. Those who fell in the crush of humanity were trampled and did not get up. In years past, the valiant folk of Phlan would have armed themselves for battle. Today they poured out of the city's western gate and fled into the countryside. Only a few remained behind, and these were mostly thieves and looters. By the time the zombies neared the Death Gates, the city was virtually empty.

The massive, ironbound Death Gates had been called by many names in the past—Fire Dragon Gates, Ogre's Bane Gates, Giant's Doom Gates. But finally they had simply come to be called the Death Gates, for again and again armies of evil had broken and perished against them.

But not this time. Rusted and worm-eaten, the Death Gates had decayed along with the rest of the city, and no one had bothered to repair them. As the throng of zombies surged forward, the huge gates groaned. More zombies pressed against them, and more, trampling each other to pulp as they pushed at the portal.

Finally, the Death Gates exploded in a spray of rotting timber. Zombies streamed into the abandoned city. Those thieves who had chosen to linger behind and fill their pockets soon regretted their decision as they were torn limb from limb. In minutes all of Phlan was awash with zombies. Only one bastion of resistance remained, and it was upon this that the army of undead finally converged.

The temple of Tyr.

As he watched the zombie horde approach, Anton found

himself wondering for the hundredth time how the Hammerseeker and his companions fared. But there was no way to know. Sendara's runestones had revealed nothing. They could only hope that Kern was even now on his way back to the city. It was their only chance. If the temple fell before the hammer was returned, Phlan would be wiped off the face of Toril forever.

"Help us, Tyr." Anton muttered a prayer. "Help us to hold on." Six other clerics ascended the walls to stand beside Anton. Below, Tarl led a dozen more clerics in the chants that lent magical strength to the gray stone walls and the huge iron gates. At last the horde of undead reached the temple, filling the air with their foul reek.

Anton gazed at the attackers in horror. He had seen corpses raised from the grave before, and though the sight had been unpleasant, it was nothing compared to the throng of abominations he saw before him now.

These zombies were mockeries of living beings, fused from the disparate pieces of myriad creatures as if they had been pasted together by a madman. A snarling elf possessing arms that ended, not in hands, but in the snapping heads of vipers. An undead lion with the rotting upper bodies of three bow-wielding halflings protruding from its back. A gigantic spider, its head that of a beautiful, pale-skinned woman, but its eyes the mindless, many-faceted orbs of an insect. And still more and worse that made Anton sick even to look.

"In the name of Tyr, return to the graves that spawned you, creatures of evil!" Anton boomed, raising his arms above his head. The six clerics flanking him followed suit. Shimmering blue light glowed around their fingertips.

A score of zombies in the lead abruptly collapsed into heaps of dust, destroyed by the holy power of Tyr, but more zombie abominations lurched forward to take the place of those that had been eliminated.

"Come, clerics of Tyr!" a goblin fused to the back of a decomposing wolf cackled with a dirty grin. "Come, join us."

"Why do you resist?" a mold-covered woman with scorpion tails for hair called in a syrupy voice. "If you fight us, you will perish, and then your bodies will be fused to ours. Whether you resist or not, inevitably you will join us."

A cacophony rose from the surging throng. "Join us! Joined to us! Join us!"

Anton gagged in revulsion. "Let Tyr's power strengthen you!" he called to the clerics beside him. All raised their arms once more, calling down the holy wrath of their god. Again, an entire rank of zombies exploded into clouds of choking dust. Still more shambled forward, jeering at the clerics of Tyr.

Again, Anton and the six clerics beside him summoned Tyr's power to destroy the slaving undead. And still again. One of the clerics collapsed in exhaustion, but the others chanted on, sending their prayers to Tyr. Fifty more undead burst into foul-smelling dust before another two clerics crumpled into unconsciousness, utterly drained from the effort of channeling so much magical energy.

In the end Anton alone stood upon the rampart to call on Tyr's power. It was a measure of his willpower that a dozen more zombies exploded into yellow splinters.

Anton felt his knees give way. He slumped to the battlement, gasping for breath. He and his comrades had destroyed fully ten score zombies. But more had appeared to take their places, and the horde stretched through the city's streets as far as the eye could see, out the Death Gates and to the distant horizon, a great, writhing, fearsome stain upon the land.

"Strengthen the gates!" he shouted down hoarsely.

Tarl was ready. "Tyr, grant us the power of your protection!" the white-haired cleric called out in a ringing voice.

A dozen clerics chanted fervent prayers. Suddenly, massive columns of jagged stone began to push up out of the ground before the gates, growing like gigantic trees. In moments, a dozen columns towered in front of the gates, bolstering the portals. As the first zombies approached, spikes shot out of

the columns like huge, stony thorns, impaling the undead creatures. The zombies writhed on the spikes, shredding their own rotting flesh with their struggles. Blue lightning crackled around their bodies, burning them to cinders.

More zombies lurched mindlessly toward the gates. They, too, were impaled by the huge stone thorns and consumed by holy fire. Still more followed suit.

The clerics chanted on. As one tired, slumping to his knees, another stepped forward to take his or her place. Through it all, Tarl's voice never faltered.

The zombies continued their mindless advance, letting out inhuman screams as the spikes rent their undead flesh and lightning coursed through their bodies, streaming out of their wounds and blankly staring eyes.

The clerics chanted on, their voices growing ragged.

Suddenly the mass of zombies parted before the gate. A huge fire giant strode through their ranks. His undead body was whole, but instead of eyes, in each socket was lodged the head of a dwarf. Screaming orders, the dual dwarf heads directed the lumbering body of the giant. The towering giant gripped two of the columns in its enormous hands.

A dozen spikes shot out, piercing the giant's hands. Holy magic crackled along the length of the monster's arms. Flesh sizzled and bubbled, filling the air with its stench. But the magic was not enough. The giant's arms tensed. The two columns shattered in a spray of stone, clearing a space before the gate. The giant reached out, gripping the top of the iron portal.

Tarl, hearing the collapse, cried, "Louder, clerics of Tyr!" but this time their chants were to no avail.

The fire giant grunted; the dual dwarf heads shrieked orders. The monster's muscles bulged until they seemed ready to burst. Suddenly the sound of rending metal shattered the air. Shards of iron flew in all directions. The gates were sundered.

The clerics of Tyr stared in horror as the fire giant stepped

through, the dwarf heads in its eye sockets laughing evilly. Even then, Tarl Desanea stood strong.

He could see the magically animated zombie clearly. In one swift move, he hurled his warhammer. It spun through the air and struck the giant directly between its hideous dwarf-eyes. The fire giant's head exploded in a spray of rotting meat. It tottered and fell backward, crushing dozens of zombies to pulp beneath its bulk.

"Retreat to the temple!" Tarl shouted.

Hastily the clerics retreated, hauling Anton and the others who had collapsed back with them.

"What of you, Brother Tarl?" Sister Sendara called out when it became clear that Tarl did not intend to budge from the twisted wreckage of the gates.

"My place is here," the white-haired cleric said fiercely.

The old priestess only nodded, understanding in her dark eyes. She dashed into the temple with the others.

"Hurry, Kern," Tarl whispered softly, hoping somehow, somewhere, his son could hear him. "Wherever you are, you must hurry."

As the zombies rushed forward, jabbering with wicked glee, Tarl held up a single hand.

"By Tyr, none shall pass!"

Suddenly a shining wall of transparent blue fire appeared, sealing the gaping breach in the temple's wall. The zombies recoiled from it. They could not pass through the holy light. Tarl clenched his jaw, concentrating. Despite the cold, sweat beaded on his furrowed brow, rolling in rivulets down his face. He could feel Tyr's strength flowing through him like liquid fire. A strange elation began to fill him; a fierce grin spread across his face. His days of self-pity and mourning were gone. All that mattered was his belief in Tyr and in justice.

By all the gods of light, Shal, Tarl shouted inwardly, I will not give up! Somehow, I will hold on!

Zombies shrieked in rage as by the dozens they tried to pass

through the gates and perished. The magical barrier did not waver. Tarl's faith sustained him against their onslaught. But gradually, the fire in his blood burned hotter and hotter.

Inside the temple's portico, Anton staggered weakly to his feet. He gazed between the marble columns. Awe filled him at what he saw.

"How long . . . how long do you think he can hold the wall?" he asked in hoarse amazement.

"Until the magic consumes him," Sister Sendara answered sharply, "and he dies."

* * * * *

Kern and his companions were up with the cold gray dawn.

Daile drew her previously miniaturized mount from a pocket and set it on the ground. Miltiades' white stallion breathed on the figurine, and instantly Daile's roan mare was snorting and pawing at the ground. Unfortunately, Evaine and Gamaliel were without mounts.

"I can run as swiftly as any horse," Gamaliel said with a laugh. Shimmering, his body remolded itself into his feline form. It was Listle who came up with a solution for Evaine. The elf gave her horse to the sorceress while she herself rode behind Trooper on Lancer's broad back. This was much to the elder paladin's chagrin, however, for it was clear after the first mile that Listle was a definite saddle hog.

"All your squirming is going to make me sick," he growled to the elven illusionist. "Can't you sit still?"

"No," she replied sweetly.

The old paladin grunted in exasperation. Listle gave a smug smile and wriggled another inch forward on the saddle, claiming still more territory for herself.

Trooper bent down and pretended to scratch his mount's ears. "All right, Lancer," he whispered surreptitiously to the big stallion. "I'll hold onto the saddle horn while you start kicking...."

"Elves have very good ears, Trooper," Listle warned.

The paladin hurriedly sat up straight, a guilty look on his

face.

Kern shook his head as he watched this exchange. He could almost believe that this was the old Listle he saw, unpredictable and light-hearted, smiling and joking as if she had never spoken of Sifahir's tower or of what had happened to her there. Almost. Except that every once in a while, when she must have thought he wasn't looking, she would glance fleetingly in Kern's direction, sadness in her silvery eyes.

"You can't love an illusion," he muttered softly to himself. "Gods, you can't even get a grip on one!"

He shook his head, trying to clear it. He couldn't think about Listle. Not now. He had to be ready to face Sirana at the pool.

All morning they made slow progress, ascending a narrow pass between knife-edged peaks, breaking trail through deep drifts of soft, powdery snow. The wind at the summit whipped at them cruelly, and they quickly descended the other side of the pass, riding into a deep valley.

"Are we nearing the pinnacle of stone, Evaine?" Miltiades asked as the sun began its westward trek. The paladin rode close to the sorceress.

"I think so," she replied. "I would know for certain if I could get a look above the trees."

"I think I can arrange something," Daile said a bit mysteriously. Without explanation, the ranger wheeled her horse around and quickly disappeared among the trees.

Kern exchanged a curious glance with the others.

Scant minutes later, Daile caught up with the group. Her cheeks were flushed, and she seemed slightly out of breath.

"I got a glimpse of the spire," she said excitedly. "It's no more than an hour's ride ahead."

Kern gave the ranger a piercing look. "How do you know, Daile?"

"I... I found a pile of boulders and climbed them," she said, but this didn't ring true. However, no one pressed the question.

Before long, the sun slipped behind a mountain, casting a premature gloom over the forest. Finally the pines gave way to rolling alpine tundra, and they espied the pinnacle of stone. It loomed above them, a foreboding sentinel. At the base of the natural basalt spire was a grove of what appeared to be dark, leafless oak trees. But there was something unnatural about the grove.

"I can see through the trees!" Listle exclaimed in surprise.

"Can't you feel it?" Daile asked, shuddering. 'They're not living trees at all. They're shadows. Dark echoes of the trees that used to grow there.'" She swore fiercely. "An abomination."

"It is the magic of the twilight pool," Evaine explained. "It pervades the very ground here, perverting all it touches. We must be careful."

Kern drew the hammer from his belt. "At least there are no monsters here to block our way."

"You're awfully sure of yourself," Trooper noted cuttingly.

"Do you see any monsters?" Kern asked in exasperation.

"No, but that's not the point." Trooper scratched his grizzled beard thoughtfully. "I remember a man who might not have been as eager as you to ride into that grove."

Kern groaned. "I know you're trying to help, Trooper, but this isn't really the time for one of your long-winded stories."

"Nonsense," the old paladin snorted. "It's the perfect time. This fellow I'm thinking of was a veteran warrior before you were even a mischievous whim in your parents' minds. One day we were riding across the Stonelands some leagues to the east of here when we saw a huge white fortress perched high on a hill. I asked him what he thought of the place. He said to me, 'Well, it's white on this side.'" The paladin paused, apparently waiting for Kern's reaction.

"I don't understand," Kern said with a frown.

"Don't jump to conclusions, lad!" Trooper's bushy eyebrows bristled as if for emphasis. "That's what it means. Believe what your eyes tell you, but only what they tell you, and no

more."

Kern nodded, realizing his foolhardiness. It seemed there was still much to being a paladin that he had yet to learn. But there was no more time. They had reached the pool. He would just have to do his best to remember the lessons Trooper had taught him these last days, and hope he had learned enough.

The riders dismounted. On foot, they crossed the gray, snow-dusted tundra to the shadow-filled grove of trees. Evaine paused, shutting her eyes and spreading her arms wide. She winced, a flicker of pain crossing her brow.

"I can feel the power of the pool emanating from among the trees," she said hoarsely. "The entrance to the cavern is somewhere in the grove."

They stepped among the twisted shadow trees.

"I can still feel the suffering," Daile murmured. "Everything that perished here did so in great pain."

Gloom filled the air. Kern could see no more than a dozen paces ahead in the murk. The trees seemed to close in behind them with disconcerting swiftness. It was almost as if the trees had moved to block their escape, Kern thought. He quickly discarded the unpleasant notion.

Trooper pulled out an oil-soaked torch, and flint and tinder to light it.

"I wouldn't do that," Evaine hissed.

The old paladin froze, then nodded. "You're right. I doubt they much care for fire."

"Whom do you speak of?" Miltiades asked, but Trooper did not answer.

They continued on.

Listle looked around nervously, her eyes growing wider by the minute. She began to turn her head this way and that. It felt as if someone—or something—was creeping up from behind them. She felt sure of it. The sensation grew stronger with each passing step.

"There's something behind us!" she whispered hoarsely.

"Get a hold of yourself," Trooper growled. "There is magic at work here. Fear lingers on the air, but you have to resist it. We're only as strong as our weakest link. If you succumb, Listle, we're all lost."

She nodded silently, clenching her jaw. She did her best to push the fear from her mind. It wasn't easy, but if the others could manage, she could as well.

A rough, natural wall of stone loomed before them in the gray air. A jagged opening yawned like a gigantic maw. Evaine did not need to say that this was the entrance to the pool.

The attack came without warning.

A ring of shadow trees closed around them, swinging dark limbs ending in sharp, broken branches.

Kern was knocked from his feet and fell hard to the earth. A tree plucked Daile off the ground. The ranger screamed as she struggled to free herself, but more and more branches snaked out to grip her.

A dozen branches reached for Miltiades. He swung at them with his sword, his blade passing right through the shadow substance of the trees. Quickly he scrambled out of their reach. Evaine chanted the words of a spell. A ball of green lightning appeared in her hand, which she hurled at a knot of shadow trees. The lightning expanded as it flew through the air. It struck the approaching trees dead-on, bursting in a brilliant spray of emerald sparks. The shadow trees marched on, unaffected.

"Let her go!" Kern shouted, gaining his feet and charging the tree that held Daile. He swung the hammer at its trunk. Like Miltiades' sword, it passed right through the immaterial substance of the tree.

"How can we fight shadows?" Trooper cried. He, too, was having no luck with his sword, and Gamaliel's claws proved no more effective against the shadow trees.

"I have an idea," Listle shouted. "Everyone, hold your weapons high!"

Kern didn't know what the elf intended, but there was no time to question her. The circle of trees was tightening around them. He raised the Hammer of Tyr into the air. Trooper and Miltiades did likewise with their weapons.

Listle moved her hands in an intricate pattern. Suddenly all three of the upraised weapons shimmered with magical fire.

"Now give them a try," she said with a grin.

Miltiades turned to an approaching tree. He swung his sword, cleaving an outstretched branch in two. The tree recoiled in agony, the severed branch smoking. With a cry, Kern hurled himself at the tree that held Daile captive. His blow landed squarely on its trunk. The shadow tree shuddered as crimson flame licked up its dark surface.

It still did not let go of Daile.

Kern swore. The flames would consume her along with the tree.

"Daile, you've got to break free!" he cried.

"I can't!" She struggled frantically, to no avail. The flames leaped higher, until Daile was lost to sight. Kern staggered backward in horror as the tree toppled to the ground. In moments the flames died down and vanished. There was nothing left of the shadow tree.

Daile sat on the ground, unhurt, a puzzled expression on her face.

"How—How—" she began.

"It's illusionary fire!" Listle called out in explanation.

Suddenly Kern understood the logic. "Illusionary fire to burn shadow trees," he said in amazement. "How did you guess, Listle?"

She regarded him with a strange expression. "I'm the expert on illusions, aren't I, Kern?"

He did not have time to reply. Cold, misty branches clutched at him from behind. He whirled around, hammer blazing, and another tree was turned into flaming splinters.

With the help of Listle's magical fire, Kern, Miltiades, and Trooper made quick work of the rest of the shadow trees. At

last the grove was silent. If the remaining trees were capable of fighting, they were less willing to try now.

Kern drew in a deep breath of relief. They had survived the first test.

* * * * *

"This cannot be!" Sirana shrieked.

She stood upon a small spur of rock in the center of the pool of twilight. Her body was completely obscured now by the brilliant metallic flecks that swirled madly beneath her skin, but she neither noticed nor cared. She watched an image in the surface of the pool. Kern and his wretched band of friends had just slain her beautiful shadow trees.

"How dare they defy me?" she screamed once more, her voice resounding through the vast cavern.

For the first time since becoming guardian of the pool, she felt a pang of anxiety. She had believed her power to be invincible. Could it be that these fools truly presented a threat to her?

"They will not defeat me!" she snarled. "I will have my revenge. And the Hammer of Tyr. Then I will become a goddess!"

But perhaps she needed some help.

Yes, that was it. Why hadn't she thought of getting help sooner? There was one in particular who could help her defeat the paladin-puppy and his band of idiots. In fact, he would have no choice but to aid her.

She cast her mind forth, using the power of the pool to send forth a summons. A summons that could not be refused.

When that was done, she turned her thoughts to a plan. She needed something else out of the ordinary to neutralize the invaders. But what?

Suddenly a gleaming tendril of water lifted itself from the pool, bearing a staff of dull silver. Sirana laughed.

Ah, yes, the Staff of Twilight. The pool knew her very thoughts. She reached out and grasped the throbbing staff.

Now she had everything she needed.

* * * * *

Dusk alighted on the high crag, spreading wide his midnight-black wings.

A thousand dragons filled the huge valley that stretched before him. For three days he had flown the length and breadth of the Moonsea, using the power Sirana had granted him from the pool to rally the evil dragons. Black, blue, red, and green, he sought them all in their lairs, deep in dank caves and perched on mountain heights. The magic of the twilight pool lent power to his words, and it had been simple to fan the spark of hatred each dragon bore in its heart for humankind.

"Hear me now, my brothers and sisters!" Dusk trumpeted, his voice thundering throughout the valley. "The second dragon-rage is nigh! We shall drive the humans from their homes. We shall slay them to the last. And then we will plunder their cities of treasure. Each of you will gain a hoard of gold such as a king only dreams of!"

And, Dusk added to himself, I will have a hundred times that many riches, a treasure such as Faerun has never known. He smiled toothily, immensely pleased. None could hold the feeblest candle to his majesty. He was the most powerful dragon in all the northlands, and the others recognized his stature. But he was more than simply the strongest of his kind. He was their ruler, the emperor of dragons.

Dusk opened his many-fanged maw, ready to send out the order that would bring the dragons soaring into the sky in a deadly rainbow of color, the order that would begin the second dragon-rage. At last, he would have his long-awaited revenge against that wretched city of Phlan, and against all humankind.

Suddenly a voice pierced his mind.

Come to me, Dusk! I have need of you.

Dusk froze. No, this could not be! He felt something clutch at his essence, as if his heart were a puppet on a string.

"I will not, Sirana!" Dusk shrieked. Flecks of twilight swirled

wildly in his one good eye.

Heed my call, Dusk. You cannot resist.

"No!" he screamed. Stones all around shattered at the furious pitch of his voice. But his wings had already started to beat, lifting him from the crag. His blood burned in his veins. It was as if he were a fish caught on a fisherman's line, slowly being reeled in. He tried to resist the pull, but it was too strong, too overpowering. The magical power he had accepted bound him inexorably to the pool.

"Curse you, Sirana! You will pay for this!"

Finally he could resist no longer. Silver sparks blazing in his eye, he soared high into the air, streaking toward the pool of twilight

Below him the evil dragons let out a roar of anger and confusion. Their leader was abandoning them. Without his influence, glorious thoughts of gold and human cities in flame evaporated from their minds. Their individual suspicious and greedy natures returned. Those that did not wheel to attack the dragons nearest to them immediately leaped into the air and sped back to their lairs to jealously guard their private hoards.

The second dragon-rage was over before it had begun.

* * * * *

The seven adventurers stood before the gaping entrance of the cave.

"Be ready," Evaine warned.

"For what?" Listle asked with a gulp.

"Anything," the sorceress replied.

Listle sighed. "I was afraid that was what you were going to say."

Kern led the way into the dark tunnel, the others following close behind. There was no hope of catching Sirana by surprise. The attack of the shadow trees showed that she was all too aware of their presence. Their only hope was to distract her long enough so that Evaine could cast her spell to destroy the pool. How exactly they were going to do that,

no one could say.

Kern held the Hammer of Tyr aloft before him. The weapon gave off a faint blue light, but the darkness seemed to smother the illumination. He could see no more than a few scant feet before him.

The tunnel wound down into the pitch darkness. The air grew stuffier. Soon Kern was sweating inside his armor. It was growing difficult to breathe.

There was no warning when the floor suddenly yawned beneath them.

Kern screamed as he plummeted through jet blackness. He heard the cries of the others around him, heard their voices echoing off stone, but he could no longer see them. Dank air whipped wildly past him. The cries of the others were cut short. Kern felt himself become tangled in a mass of something sticky and rubbery.

Then he hit the ground.

He lay stunned for long minutes. Then, dizzily, he pulled himself to his feet. A dim gray light sprang to life around him. He could see that his armor was covered with sticky blue cobwebs. That meant someone had tried to use ...

His head snapped up. He stood at the edge of a dull, metallic-looking pool of water in the center of a vast cavern. He gasped when he saw his companions suspended in the air twenty feet above the pool, struggling futilely against invisible bonds that gripped them.

A form stood on a rock in the center of the pool, holding a gleaming staff. At first, the being's outline was obscured by the bright sparks of twilight that swirled within its flesh.

Then, with a surge of fury, Kern recognized the being.

"Yes, Kern, it is I," Sirana's voice sneered. "Welcome to the pool of twilight."

19

Twilight Falls

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, paladin," Sirana's voice leered as Kern raised the Hammer of Tyr.

He hesitated.

Sirana's wings fluttered. She waved her silvery staff, and Kern's friends danced in the air above the pool like puppets on strings. Daile was thrashing like a caged animal, while Trooper muttered a stream of curses. Miltiades and Gamaliel were having no better luck than the venerable paladin. The magical trap was too strong, even for those two most powerful warriors. Unable to use their hands, neither Evaine nor Listle could cast any spell. But the invisible bonds did not prevent Listle from tossing a few choice insults down at Sirana. The half-fiend ignored the elf's imaginative taunts.

"Strike me with that precious hammer of yours, Kern, and you're going to ruin this useful staff as well. If you destroy the Staff of Twilight your beloved friends will plunge into my pool."

The steely waters sucked and gurgled hungrily about the rock in the pool's center.

"And when they do, paladin, they'll be fused with zombie corpses that wait in the pool's depths, ready to help your friends turn into creatures of darkness." Sirana raised her gnarled arms exultantly. "Now that would be a sight worth seeing. The lovely sorceress Evaine, sprouting from the back of a decomposing troll, recruited into my zombie army!" Sirana's eyes flashed. "Or perhaps you'd rather see what creatures I have ready to burrow into the flesh of the pretty little elf...."

She flicked the staff, and Listle screamed as she dropped a few inches, dangling closer to the perilous surface of the pool.

With a growl, Kern lowered the Hammer of Tyr.

"There is one way you can save your precious friends," Sirana's all-pervasive voice cooed. "Except for the one you call Miltiades, that vile metal can of moldering bones. There will be no saving that... that heinous defiler of my father's tower. I plan to grind that wretched skeleton to dust!" Unseen magical hands shook Miltiades violently. His skeletal

body rattled inside his armor, though his ever-stoic expression did not waver. "However, I will free the others—even the treacherous sorceress, Evaine—if you will do just one tiny thing. Drop the Hammer of Tyr into the pool."

Kern scowled, gritting his teeth. He clenched the holy relic tightly. It was his destiny to return the hammer to Phlan. He couldn't simply cast it into the pool. Yet if he did not, it looked as if his friends would die. Slowly, he extended the hammer out over the pool's edge.

"Kern, don't!" Listle managed to cry out. Invisible bonds squeezed the elf brutally, silencing her.

"Do it, paladin!"

Kern clenched his jaw, loosening his grip....

Thunder split the air.

Jagged chunks of stone crashed to the cavern's floor as a hole burst open in the ceiling above. Something crashed through with a deafening noise.

A vast black dragon.

Kern froze in astonishment, realizing it was the beast Trooper had called Dusk.

The dragon circled menacingly.

"How have you forced me to return here, sorceress?" the dragon hissed.

The half-fiend laughed shrilly. "Just because you are guardian of the pool no longer—and I am guardian in your place—does not mean your pact with the pool is broken. When you accepted the power I granted you, you also accepted shackles that bind you to me. You cannot ignore my call, Dusk!"

"This cannot be!" the dragon shrieked. Brilliant silver sparks danced in his one good eye. "I was on the verge of sending a thousand evil dragons against the cities of the Moonsea. The dragon-rage was about to begin!"

Kern gasped as the beast whirled dangerously close to his friends. They bobbed up and down in the dragon's wake, like leaves buffeted by the wind.

"Your petty dragon-rage means nothing to me," Sirana's voice snapped. "I have need of you here. These vile creatures intend to destroy the pool of twilight. Without its magic, you wouldn't have the power of a garden snake, Dusk. Now, obey my command. Kill these intruders for me." She pointed the staff directly at Kern. "And start with this puppy-paladin."

"I am not your slave," the dragon bellowed. His vast wings propelled his sinuous body toward the cavern's ceiling.

"As long as I am guardian of the pool, you must obey me, Dusk!"

The dragon threw his head back, trumpeting his fury. "Then you will die, sorceress, and command me no more!"

Dusk barked a magical word. Suddenly a globe of impenetrable darkness sprang into being around the rock Sirana stood upon. Folding his wings back against his scaly body, the dragon dove toward the inky sphere.

At the same time, brilliant silver-gray streaks of magic from Sirana's staff shattered the globe of darkness. Dusk accelerated his descent, extending his sicklelike claws.

Sirana waved a hand frantically, and a shimmering haze appeared around her an instant before the dragon struck.

His blow glanced off the magical shield in a spray of sparks.

With a bellow, he winged back toward the cavern's ceiling.

Sirana smiled smugly, but the force of the dragon's blow had managed to knock her off balance. She teetered on the edge of the rock, arms flailing. Then she tumbled backward into the pool. The Staff of Twilight flew from her hand.

Kern watched in horror as the staff tumbled and rolled. It stopped less than a handspan from the edge.

Daile gasped. "We're sinking!" the ranger shouted.

Kern looked up in horror. Sure enough, his six friends were all gradually descending toward the pool's surface.

"Can't one of you blasted spellcasters do something?"

Trooper snapped. "I've already had my bath this year!"

Both Evaine and Listle were powerless. Kern swore.

Somehow he had to get that staff.

The waters of the pool frothed angrily. Something began to rise out of the depths, something huge. Gray foam ran from its sides as it lifted higher and higher, reaching toward the cavern's heights.

Sirana.

The gigantic, misshapen form of the half-fiend sorceress stood a full fifty feet high. Twilight-colored specks danced beneath her skin like stars gone mad. She reached out colossal arms.

"Fight me now, wyrm!"

The dragon screamed and once again plummeted toward her. The companions could only watch in dread fascination as the two titans grappled with each other. They had their own troubles. Inch by inch, they continued to be lowered toward the surface of the pool.

Dusk's claws raked Sirana's body, and searing magic crackled through the dragon. The reek of burned flesh filled the cavern. Dusk ignored the pain. The dragon's snapping jaws closed on Sirana's throat. At the same moment, a dozen spikes of brilliant magic punched through Dusk's body like white-hot spears. Neither monster dared to loose its hold on the other as they began to sink.

Locked in a fatal embrace, dragon and gigantic sorceress disappeared into the pool of twilight.

The torpid waters closed over them with a gurgling sound, silencing their inhuman screams. A ripple spread across the pool's surface. Then all was still.

Kern shook his head in amazement. Evil really does destroy itself, he thought.

Now, to free his friends, who hovered only a few inches above the surface of the pool. Quickly, he shed his armor and stood on the edge of the basin.

"Are you insane, lad?" Trooper growled.

"Maybe," Kern said with a grin. "But there's only one way to find out."

Ignoring the shouts of protest from his friends, he dove into the pool.

The thick water closed about him, oily against his skin. He felt the pool's magic swirl around him, trying to penetrate his flesh, to absorb his essence into its own.

Suddenly, Kern was buoyed to the pool's surface by a mass of sticky blue cobwebs. His unmagic did protect him! He began swimming for the spur of rock in the pool's center. In truth, it was more like dragging himself through molasses than swimming. After several minutes of laborious effort, he made it to the rock. He pulled himself out of the pool, shaking off as many of the blue cobwebs as he could. Then, carefully, he picked up the Staff of Twilight

He realized then that he had absolutely no idea what to do with it.

"Er, does any one know how to work one of these things?" he asked sheepishly.

"I don't really think we have time for lessons for beginners," Trooper commented acidly. He and the others were no more than a handspan above the silvery waters.

"You can do it, Kern," Evaine said calmly. "I'll help you."

He nodded jerkily.

"Now, grip the staff tightly and concentrate on me," the sorceress instructed. "Close your eyes and envision a thread running from my waist right to the staff. Now, begin reeling it in."

"Like a fishing rod?" he asked tentatively.

"Exactly."

Kern tried to do as she advised. His heart pounded in his chest. He knew he didn't have much time. He clenched his eyes tightly, concentrating....

Something bumped into him. He windmilled his arms wildly to keep from falling off the rock. He opened his eyes to see Evaine standing near him at the edge of the pool.

"A little shaky, Kern, but not bad," she said with a smile.

"However, why don't you let me handle the others?"

He relinquished the staff only too gladly.

Minutes later, transported by Evaine and the Staff of Twilight, the adventurers stood together on solid ground. Kern had managed to scrape off most of the cobweb residue, but putting his armor back on was a sticky business.

"It is time to cast your spell, Evaine," Miltiades said gravely. "You must destroy the pool."

The sorceress was already preparing her incantation. She lit a fire in her small copper brazier, sprinkling a handful of dried herbs and unusual powders over the flame. Multicolored sparks crackled into the air. She sat cross-legged before the brazier, drawing out an oval crystal. She set it carefully in the fire's center. Immediately the gem began to pulsate in rhythm with the flickering flames.

"I'm not certain how long this will take," Evaine explained to the others. "I've never encountered a pool quite like this one before. The other pools I've destroyed have all been either purely dark or light in nature." As she talked, the sorceress deftly twisted her long hair into a knot to keep it out of the fire. "But this pool is different. Its essence is—" she struggled for the right words—"primal . . . chaotic. Its source lies in a magic far older than that of the other pools, a magic that comes from the time before light and dark were separate, and all the universe dwelt in twilight."

"Will you be able to destroy it, Evaine?" Kern asked solemnly. She laughed grimly. "There's just one way to find out." She held her hands above the brazier and gem, chanting arcane words. Suddenly her voice fell silent, and her green eyes stared blankly into space. The sorceress sat as if hewn of stone.

"She will be like this for some time," Gamaliel said, standing protectively behind Evaine. "She cannot be disturbed. Should anything wake her from her spell before it is complete, the gem will break, and she will die." By the fierce gleam in his eye, it was clear the barbarian man did not intend to allow such a mishap to occur.

There was nothing to do then but wait. Kern sat down on a rock.

Daile sighed, wandering a short distance from the others. She felt strangely let down. She had vowed to avenge her father's death, but Sirana was dead, slain by the dragon, and the young ranger's arrows had played no part in it. The fire of revenge still smoldered in her heart. What of her oath now? she asked herself. How could she keep her word to her father? She rested her hands against the smooth wood of her magical bow.

"How much longer?" Trooper asked Gamaliel with a scowl. The older paladin paced fretfully.

The stone-faced barbarian shrugged. "I am no sorcerer. I cannot say."

"What is it, Trooper?" Listle asked in concern.

The old man shook his head. "I'm not certain. It's just that there's something about this place that bothers—"

A gurgling sound emanated from the pool, cutting off the old paladin.

All turned to see the surface of the pool begin bubbling furiously.

In a spray of foam, something began to lift from the roiling waters. A gigantic creature uncurled itself from the depths of the pool to tower above the companions.

"By Tyr above!" Trooper whispered.

For a scant moment, Kern wondered how Sirana and Dusk could still live. Quickly he realized the truth. They were dead enough. But the magic of the pool had fused their gigantic corpses into a hideous new undead form.

The dragon's tattered wings sprouted from the back of the gigantic half-fiend, and her hands ended in his claws. Dusk's neck sprouted from the center of Sirana's chest, his fanged maw snapping mindlessly. The creature took a lumbering step forward, wading through the pool. Its sinuous dragon tail snapped behind it like a huge, deadly whip. Sirana's dead eyes stared with blank malice. The pool of twilight

finally possessed a guardian that it could utterly control.

The dragon's maw opened wide.

"Beware dragonbreath!" Trooper shouted.

Hastily, Kern, Listle, and Daile dove out of the way. Gamaliel crouched protectively before Evaine, still deep in her spell, but a heartbeat later Miltiades stepped between the barbarian and the creature of the pool.

A black, acrid-smelling cloud issued from the dragon's mouth, gouging the stone floor and melting stalagmites into piles of slag. A spray of dark acid splattered against Miltiades' armor, pitting the hard steel. A few droplets flew past, burning into Gamaliel's flesh, but Evaine remained unhurt. That was all that mattered to the barbarian.

The new guardian reached the edge of the pool. It could not leave the water that had spawned it and gave it continued strength. So the guardian reached high above with its gigantic arm and wrenched a huge stalactite from the cavern's ceiling. Dead eyes blazing, it hurled the sharp chunk of stone toward the adventurers.

The stalactite narrowly missed Kern, striking the stone floor and bursting into splinters of rock that traced hot tracks across his exposed skin. He stood, bleeding from a dozen small wounds. Already the guardian was reaching for another stalactite.

Trooper and Miltiades rushed forward, and Kern sprang into motion. But almost immediately, the guardian launched another stalactite. Kern raised his shield, doubting it would do much good against the crushing force of a half-ton of solid limestone.

Abruptly a bright streak of light arced through the air, striking the stalactite in midflight. The chunk of stone veered off its deadly course and plunged into the pool. The guardian let out a piercing shriek of rage.

Kern turned to see Listle clutching the Staff of Twilight. Its powers of levitation had diverted the stalactite from its deadly trajectory.

Again and again, the zombie guardian snapped off sharp-pointed stalactites and hurled them at the adventurers. Listle waved the staff vigorously, using its magic to turn the stones aside. Daile tried to launch arrows at the guardian, but clouds of acid dragonbreath burnt them to ashes before they could reach their target. Kern, Trooper, and Miltiades managed to creep within striking distance.

When at last Kern was within range, he didn't hesitate. He hurled the Hammer of Tyr directly at the guardian's head. The weapon flashed with blue radiance as it spun through the air.

Suddenly a shimmering tentacle of metallic water snaked out of the pool, curling around the hammer. The liquid tentacle halted the weapon in midflight and began dragging it down into the murky depths.

Quickly Kern summoned the hammer back to his outstretched hand. It seemed the pool protected its guardian even as the guardian protected the pool. How could he harm the creature if his hammer couldn't reach it? A stalactite struck unnervingly close to Kern and the two paladins.

"Listle, what's the matter?" Miltiades called out.

The elf bit her lip, shaking the Staff of Twilight. A thin tendril of smoke rose from its tip. "I think this thing's had it," she said glumly, casting the spent staff aside.

"Well, you'll be able to say the same thing about us shortly if we don't do something about this blasted creature," Trooper snapped. He testily gathered his gray robe around his knobby knees to dodge a flying chunk of rock. "Cat-man, how is that sorceress of yours doing?"

"Her spell is not yet complete," Gamaliel said sharply, his eyes flashing at the mere hint his mistress was not doing all she could.

"Just a question," Trooper grumped. "No need to take it so personally."

"All right, I have an idea," Listle cried out. "But I'm going to

need you to distract old two-heads here."

Trooper looked at the elf suspiciously. "What harebrained scheme are you—"

"Just keep zombie-breath occupied, all right?" she replied. She traced an intricate pattern in the air with her fingers. Silvery sparks crackled about her feet, and suddenly she began to move so rapidly she blurred before their eyes.

There was no time to doubt her strategy. The three warriors darted between the cascading rocks, reaching the pool's edge. They attacked—Kern with his hammer, Miltiades with his long sword, Trooper with his rune sword. More metallic tentacles lifted themselves from the pool, snaking wildly to parry their blows. But a few swings managed to slip through, landing against the mutant zombie's knees. It let out a roar and bent over to reach its foes with long, scythelike claws.

As a result, it did not see the silver streak that sped around the far side of the pool, approaching on its blind side.

Just then, Listle reached the melee, the silver sparks around her feet fading as her swiftness spell ended. Still distracted, the creature did not notice as the elf reached out a single finger and touched its flesh, whispering the words of a spell. Instantly the guardian straightened, growing rigid. The dead eyes that had once been Sirana's stared into space, gazing at some imagined foe with a look equal parts horror and outrage. The dragon's maw snarled at a conjured enemy as the creature clawed futilely at thin air.

Listle's illusion spell had worked! In its mind, the creature was now battling its worst nightmare. What sort of form that nightmare had taken, there was no way to know. But if the guardian lost the imaginary battle, the consequences would prove fatal—and very real.

The elf grinned triumphantly at her fellow warriors. Suddenly, caught in the throes of its phantom battle, the guardian whirled. Its serpent tail whistled through the air, cracking like a gigantic whip as it struck Listle forcibly.

The elf's delicate body was hurled through the air like a

piece of chaff. She struck a pile of jagged rocks and did not move. Blood seeped from a wound on Listle's temple.

"No!" Kern screamed in disbelief, taking a step toward the fallen elf.

A hand on his shoulder halted him.

"Kern."

It was Trooper, his voice solemn. "The battle is not over."

Kern shook his head dumbly. Could an illusion . . . could Listle ... die?

At the same moment, Daile moved toward the edge of the pool, raising her bow. She felt a sick knot in her stomach, fear that Listle was dead. But Daile was determined that the elf's sacrifice would not be in vain. Nor would her father's. Now was her chance for vengeance, while the creature was still distracted.

Do not fail me now, bow, she silently instructed her weapon. She nocked an arrow, raising the magical longbow.

"I am no sorcerer," a calm voice said behind her, "but I do know that if you strike the creature with an arrow, the elf's spell will be broken."

Daile froze.

Gamaliel stepped before her. As always, the barbarian's chiseled face was impassive.

Daile clenched her fingers. She ought to release the arrow right away. Her opportunity for vengeance could pass at any moment. But something in Gamaliel's eyes held her.

"A single arrow cannot slay this beast," he went on softly.

The bow trembled in her grip. "But I vowed to my father..."

Gamaliel reached out, clasping her wrist. "Remember what I told you," he said quietly. "Sometimes those with the wild gift lose themselves in the hunt. But this is not your hunt, Daile." He nodded toward Kern. "It is his. Do not take that from him." A shadow touched the barbarian's lips. It might almost have been a smile. "Fear not, Daile. You will have many opportunities in the years to come to honor your father's memory with your deeds."

Slowly Daile lowered the bow. "I will honor him," she whispered fiercely.

Gamaliel only nodded, his grip tightening.

"Kern," Trooper growled fiercely. "Listle's spell won't last much longer. Act now! Use the Hammer of Tyr!"

Kern was dazed and reacting slowly.

"Life was worth everything to Listle," Miltiades prompted quietly. "Yet she was willing to risk her life for this quest. Do not let that sacrifice come to nothing."

These words bit deep into Kern's heart. Suddenly he felt his fear, his anger—his confusion—melt away.

He whirled to face the mutant. The creature writhed before him, still tackling the phantom enemy that only its grotesque eyes could see. It lurched forward, within range.

With a cry to Tyr, Kern hurled the glowing hammer with all his might.

This time the metallic tentacles that reached up to snatch it out of the air were smashed. The hammer hit the guardian full in the chest. Blue lightning crackled, transfixing the zombie. In a heartbeat, the hammer returned to Kern's grip.

"What's going on?" a clear voice asked.

Evaine had woken from her spell. In her hand she held the gem that had been bathed in the magical flame of her brazier. An energy pulsated inside the gem, first dark, then light, beating to a slow, steady rhythm.

"Is your spell complete, Evaine?" Miltiades asked.

"It is." She frowned, noticing the gigantic mutant zombie struggling against the magic that encircled it. "Something tells me I missed out on some highlights."

"We'll explain later!" Kern cried hoarsely. "I think now would be a good time to destroy the pool."

Evaine smiled, her green eyes glinting with a dangerous light. "With pleasure." She raised the pulsating gem and cast it into the pool of twilight.

The crystal sank silently beneath the surface of the pool. At first nothing happened. Kern wondered with a shiver of fear

if Evaine's spell had misfired. Then he noticed a faint, pulsating spot where the gem had fallen into the pool, glowing light, then dark, in a steady cadence.

The waters of the pool swirled and bubbled, but the pulsing spot began to spread, stilling the waves. The pool surged in fury, waterspouts reaching to the ceiling. But the pulsating circle continued to enlarge, its steady, calming rhythm unwavering. First dark. Then light. Then dark again.

"What's happening?" Kern shouted above the roar of the waves.

"The pool fights to keep its chaotic nature," Evaine shouted back. "But the magic within the gem is rhythmic, ordered."

Metallic foam flew through the air. The guardian of the pool—the mutant zombie that was half Sirana, half Dusk—screamed as it struggled against the holy magic that surrounded it.

By now all the pool was pulsating. Dark. Light. Dark.

The waves ebbed. The surface of the pool became as still as glass. Even the guardian became motionless, the dragon maw frozen in midscream.

The pool went dark, so dark that all the light seemed to be drained out of the cavern. The blackness hurt Kern's eyes. He counted ten heartbeats in the ominous silence. Then, all of a sudden, the pool flared brilliantly, and everything went white. The searing light seemed to burn right through stone and flesh. Ten more heartbeats. Abruptly, then, the radiance dimmed.

The pool of twilight was no more.

A gaping pit yawned in the cavern floor where the pool had existed only moments before. All that was left of Sirana and Dusk were their bones, fused together in a death embrace. But even as the adventurers watched, those bones crumbled into dust.

Evaine stumbled backward weakly, but Gamaliel caught her before she could fall. Her skin was pallid, eyes hollow, but she was smiling all the same.

"Damn, but I enjoy doing that."

* * * * *

Tarl's entire body glowed sapphire blue. Radiant light flowed through him, out of him, sustaining the shimmering wall that held the army of zombies at bay outside the gates of the temple of Tyr.

His faith had not dimmed, but he knew that his body was failing. Mere flesh was not strong enough to bear the raw, crackling magic that coursed through him. The azure radiance was consuming him, ever faster. Still his belief in Tyr did not waver. Whatever happened, Tarl knew he had done all that one man could do.

"The end draws close," Sister Sendara murmured to Anton.

"By Tyr, I can see right through his hands," the patriarch said softly. "They're made of light, just like the wall!"

Even as Anton watched, more and more of Tarl's form was transformed into shimmering light. The sapphire wall began to flicker and fade. The dark army of twisted zombies surged forward with an inhuman howl of victory. In moments they would stream through the gates into the heart of the temple. Tarl could feel himself fading, growing more and more insubstantial. He channeled every last ounce of his strength into the magical wall, regretting only that he had not had the chance say good-bye to Shal, or his son.

The decomposing zombies shrieked in gleeful cacophony. They clawed past each other, pressing against the flickering barrier, ready to tear living flesh from bone.

Then, they abruptly collapsed.

Each and every rotting abomination slumped to the ground like a puppet with its strings slashed. Even as the stunned clerics watched, their twisted bodies began to bubble and steam, evaporating in a noxious yellow cloud. Then a cold wind raced through the streets of the city, blowing the poisonous atmosphere away.

"Tarl, release the gate!" Sister Sendara shouted, hobbling toward the white-haired cleric.

It was hard, so hard. The power continued to stream through Tarl like water through a busted dam. It nearly washed him away. With his last shred of consciousness, he reached out and tried to shut off the energy.

The azure radiance vanished.

Tarl dropped to the ground. The others, watching, did not know if he was alive or dead. Then they saw a shuddering breath fill his chest.

"Thank Tyr, he lives!" Tarl heard a voice cry. But he hardly noticed, his mind filled with a single thought: You've done it Kern! You've done it!

* * * * *

Kern was the first to reach Listle.

He saw that she lived, if barely. Her breathing was shallow, her face deathly pale. Carefully, he lifted the elf. Her body felt light in his arms, her bones as insubstantial as a bird's.

He laid her gently on the cloak Miltiades spread on the ground. A faint light flickered in the ruby pendant at her throat.

"She's holding on by the barest thread," Evaine said, resting a hand gently on Listle's brow. "I think it's the necklace that's keeping her alive."

The ruby's feeble flickering began to slow, growing dimmer.

"Can you do anything?" Kern asked desperately.

Slowly Evaine shook her head. "My magic cannot heal her."

She paused. "But a true paladin could."

Kern looked at Trooper and Miltiades. It was the most precious gift that the god Tyr granted his paladins, the power to heal with a single touch. "Please," he whispered urgently.

Trooper gave him a sharp look, then knelt by the elf. He laid his hands against her temples. A pale blue glow shimmered about his fingertips. Listle took a shuddering breath, then her breathing grew shallow once again.

"Miltiades, help me."

The skeletal knight knelt beside the venerable paladin.

Miltiades removed his gauntlets and laid the bare, yellowed bones of his undead hands atop Trooper's. The older man flinched at the paladin's chilling touch, but he did not pull away. The blue glow brightened. The flow of blood from the wound on Listle's forehead slowed, then stopped. Still she did not wake.

The blue nimbus around Trooper's hands vanished. With a deep sigh, the old man stood, his shaggy eyebrows drooping. "It wasn't enough. We helped some, but her injuries are too dire."

"But she can't die," Kern whispered hoarsely.

"Why?" Trooper asked sternly. "Because she's only an illusion? Is that what you still think?" His blue eyes sparked fire. "Well, if you do, you're more fool than I took you for, Kern Desanea, and a waste of time at that."

The paladin whirled and stomped away, leaving Kern speechless.

"There is one more who might save her," Miltiades said in his sepulchral voice.

"Who?" Kern demanded.

The skeletal knight's empty eye sockets seemed to regard Kern silently.

Kern's shoulders slumped as he realized what the undead paladin meant. "But I can't heal her, Miltiades," he said helplessly. "I don't have the power. I'm only a paladin-aspirant. I'm not really a paladin."

"If that is what you believe, then it is so," Miltiades intoned quietly.

Kern looked to the others for help—Evaine, Gamaliel, Daile. All regarded him sadly, silently. There was nothing they could do to help him. Nothing at all. It was up to him to act. He made a decision. Confusion became calm.

"No, Miltiades." He clenched his jaw tightly. "I spoke wrongly. I am a paladin."

He reached out and laid his hands on Listle's brow.

"By Tyr, I believe I am."

Blue light flared brilliantly about his hands. The wound on Listle's forehead dimmed to a faint shadow, then vanished. For a moment her breathing halted altogether, but the azure radiance beat brightly. Then her chest began to rise and fall in a gentle rhythm. The light in her ruby pendant began to glow steadily.

The blue nimbus faded.

Kern lifted his hands, staring at them in amazement.

Listle stirred, her silvery eyes fluttering open. "What's everybody grinning at?" the elf asked in annoyance, her voice weak but clear.

'You,' Kern said with a grateful laugh. He stood, lifting her easily to her feet and pressing his lips to hers. He stepped away, smiling broadly.

The elf's eyes widened. She opened her mouth to say something, but no words would come out.

For the first time in her life, Listle Onopordum found herself completely speechless.

20

Paladin's Promise

Trooper stood in the shadow of a huge stalagmite, a short distance from the others who were still tending to their battle wounds. A faint, bluish light shone about the old paladin as he argued adamantly with another voice only he could hear.

"It's not as if I was constantly asking you for favors, you know," Trooper whispered cantankerously, his shaggy eyebrows bristling. "Did I ask for a reward when I rescued that twittering, pea-brained Procampurian princess from that kobold den in the Stonelands? No! Did I expect any payment for destroying the Beast Cult of Malar when they had their mangy jackals harrying the highway from Cormyr to the Caravan Cities? No! Did I complain when I had to wade through the sewers beneath the biggest goblinkin warren in Faerun just so I could spy on that dull-witted orc god for you?"

He cocked his head, listening to the reply.

"Well, all right, perhaps I did in that case," he admitted with a snort. "But mind you, it was three years before the smell finally wore off!"

He shook his head, his long white beard wagging. "But that's not the point. I said that you owed me one when I agreed to help the young pup, and I meant it. Now the lad's a true paladin. That means my work is done." Trooper's steely eyes flashed resolutely. "It's time to settle our deal, Tyr."

The blue haze about him flickered for a moment. Trooper listened to the words no other could have heard.

"Nonsense!" he replied gruffly. "I've lived a long life, and a good one, if I do say so myself."

He sighed, sinking down to sit on a low shelf of stone. He was silent for a short while. "I'm tired, Tyr," he muttered finally. "Don't you see? I've had more than enough adventures to comprise a lifetime. But there's one who has served you loyally who has never had these opportunities."

He stole a glance back at the others. Miltiades stood slightly apart from his companions, watching them with what seemed, despite his fleshless face, a sorrowful expression.

"He's done the deeds in death he never had the chance to do in life. Don't you think that's worth something?" Trooper blew a breath through his drooping mustache. "And you don't even have to worry about that precious balance of yours. One life for another. What could be more just than that?"

Trooper scratched his beard, listening. Then he grinned. "I knew you'd come around to reason." His expression grew wistful as he watched his questing companions. "It's funny, but I think I'm going to miss them. Especially that impertinent elf." He scowled. "I always was a fool for dimples."

He sat up straighter, his old joints creaking in protest.

"Well, I'm ready," he whispered, annoyed. "Get on with it!"

The blue light flared brightly about the old paladin, then

dimmed.

* * * * *

"Miltiades!" Dread gripped Evaine's voice. "What's wrong?" The undead paladin stumbled backward as if jolted. Kern, Listle, Daile, and Gamaliel looked around at him in concern. Azure tendrils of light twined themselves about his armored form. A shimmering blue coil gently lowered the visor of his helm, concealing the bare bones of his face.

"My ... my quest has ended," the knight said solemnly. "I fear that my time here is at an end." He doubled over, his gauntleted hands clenched into fists. "Tyr calls me home once more." He sank to his knees.

"No!" Evaine cried. She reached out for him.

It was too late.

Like an empty suit of tipped-over armor, Miltiades buckled to the ground. The sapphire light surrounding him faded and was gone. He lay utterly still.

All stared in shocked silence.

"I'm sorry, Evaine," Kern said finally, his voice thick with emotion. "I don't think there will ever be another hero like him."

"He was the first person I ever met who truly understood me," Listle added, tears glistening in her eyes. "I'm going to miss him."

"As are we all," Gamaliel said gruffly. He put his hands on Evaine's shoulders, leading her gently but firmly away from the paladin. "Come, Evaine. We must—"

The suit of steel armor twitched.

All watched in amazement as the shining suit of armor shifted again. Then, slowly, the fallen knight pulled himself to his feet, standing tall.

Evaine let out a deep breath of relief. "Miltiades! Are you ... are you all right?" She took a hesitant step toward him.

The ancient paladin shook his helm, as if he was dizzy or unsure.

"I... I think so, Evaine," he said, but there was something

strange about his voice. Tentatively, he raised a gauntlet and lifted his visor.

Evaine gasped.

"By all the gods," she murmured. The others stared at the knight with their own expressions of wonder. Slowly, hardly daring to believe what she saw was real, Evaine reached out a hand and brushed Miltiades' cheek.

Her fingers touched warm skin.

"Evaine, what's wrong?" Miltiades asked in concern. "You're crying."

She shook her head, trying to speak but unable to find the words. He still didn't realize what had happened! In answer, she reached for his hand and pulled off one of his steel gauntlets. He stared in shock when he saw the flesh-covered hand that was exposed.

"By Tyr," he whispered softly. "I'm alive."

Evaine laughed for joy, throwing her arms around the handsome, dark-haired knight. His blue eyes shone with surprise, then he returned the embrace.

"Excuse me, Evaine," Listle said wryly, after this embrace had gone on for more than a few moments. "But there are some other people who would like a chance to hug Miltiades, too."

Evaine flushed in embarrassment, but Listle only grinned as she threw her arms around the two of them. Kern, Daile, and Gamaliel followed suit, their laughter filling the cavern.

It wasn't until later that they discovered Trooper.

They found the old paladin sitting on a low spur of stone, his eyes closed, a faintly mischievous smile resting on his lips. Heavy, golden beams of sunlight slanted down from the jagged hole in the cavern's roof, igniting the old man's hair in a fiery halo. They did not need to feel for his heartbeat to know that he was dead.

"He has passed on to Tyr's halls now," Miltiades said gravely. Evaine reached out and squeezed his hand tightly. Listle wept bitterly, burying her head in her hands as Daile did her

best to comfort the elf.

Kern knelt beside Trooper's lifeless body, not trying to hide the tears that rolled down his own cheeks. "Thank you," was all he whispered softly.

On a brilliant winter's solstice day, Kern ceremonially returned the Hammer of Tyr to its rightful place in the temple. It was an auspicious day for the ritual, Sister Sendara said, for it was the day when the sun began its trek northward and the days grew longer once more, heralding the coming spring.

There were other good omens as well, for a legendary paladin walked the world again. The temple's clerics had observed Miltiades with awe these last few days. However, Miltiades did not mind. He was used to being stared at, if for different reasons.

As Kern walked to the temple's nave bearing the hammer, the sign of hope most important to him came in the form of a tall, regal, red-haired woman who sat on a marble bench. As he neared her, the beautiful woman stood and kissed him on the cheek.

"You've grown handsome, my son," she murmured.

Kern blushed. "Thank you, Mother."

Only the barest traces of shadow lingered in the sorceress's cheeks. The Hammer of Tyr had healed her almost completely of the injury caused to her by the guardian of the pool.

No, Kern, a gruff, cantankerous voice seemed to whisper in his mind. The hammer didn't heal Shal. You healed her.

Kern looked around, wondering where the voice came from, though he had a suspicion. He knew enough not to argue.

Shal returned to her seat next to Tarl, gripping his hand affectionately. The white-haired cleric smiled proudly, even though he could not see his son. Despite its powers, the Hammer of Tyr had not cured Tarl's blindness. While this had saddened Kern, his father had told him to put his sorrow aside. Whether he could see or not, Tarl knew that he was

the same man as before. Except, perhaps, a little bit wiser. Kern couldn't help but chuckle as he passed his grinning friends on the way to the ornate marble altar. Anton nodded to him solemnly then. It was time.

"In the name of Tyr," Kern called out, "I return this relic to its rightful place!" He set the hammer down upon the altar.

The next day, Phlan started to change.

True, there was little enough different to meet the eye. The streets were still dark and sullen, littered with refuse, the buildings lining them dilapidated and crumbling. But as Kern walked through the city, here and there he noticed small things that gave him cause for hope. For the first time in recent memory, the tall smokestacks looming over the city no longer belched forth black, sulfurous smoke. A steady breeze from the Moonsea was already clearing the gloomy cloud hanging over Phlan.

People had been trickling back into the city these last days. Most of them seemed a bit dazed, as if they had just woken from a dark nightmare. They stared at the city in dismay, as if only truly seeing it for the first time. Slowly, they began to rebuild their lives.

Kern passed an old woman planting lily bulbs in a flower bed in front of her clapboard hovel. A group of raggedly clad children ran by, laughing merrily. He strolled past a tavern and realized it was the one he had passed with Tarl and Listle the day they had gone to the temple to learn the answer to Bane's riddle. Odd, he thought, that it seemed so long ago now. He watched as the innkeep busily painted over the sign that had once read "The Bloated Corpse." Now it read "The Golden Feather," a more auspicious name to Kern's mind. A pretty young woman threw open the tavern's shuttered windows, whistling a cheerful tune.

Kern shook his head. Already the grip of the dark gods was loosening. It would be a long time until Phlan was truly healed, he knew, perhaps years. But with the Hammer of Tyr returned to its rightful place, the healing had begun. Nor

would the clerics of Tyr stand idle. Already Anton and Tarl were concocting plans to help restore the city.

Kern found his traveling companions in the main room of Denlor's Tower. Tarl was upstairs with Shal. Though the sorceress seemed all but recovered, Tarl had forbidden her from working until he was certain she was fully rejuvenated.

"If I don't start doing some magic soon, I'm liable to forget how to cast a spell altogether!" she had complained, but Tarl had not been swayed, and neither Kern nor Listle were about to argue with the brawny, white-haired cleric.

Kern was dismayed but not surprised to see Daile packing her belongings.

"It's time I returned to the Valley of the Falls," she explained, slinging her magical bow over her shoulder. She smiled wryly. "If I stay away too long, the orcs will start thinking they own the place."

He laughed and hugged her tightly.

"Well, we can't have that," Kern told her. "After all, what would Ren think?"

"Keep him out of trouble, Listle," Daile told the elf as if Kern were not listening, a habit she and the elf had which annoyed him to no end.

The elf snorted, as if this was a good joke. "You wrangle your orcs, Daile. Leave Kern to me."

Her words sounded vaguely ominous, but Kern wasn't quite certain why.

Daile left the tower, promising to visit soon. But when Kern glanced out the window, he noticed that the young ranger had paused to talk to Gamaliel. Evaine's familiar was in his human form. The two spoke together for a moment, and Daile gripped the barbarian's hand tightly. Then she was gone. Kern didn't know what had passed between them, but Gamaliel stood in the courtyard until dusk began to gather, gazing off to where Daile had vanished.

A voice spoke behind him.

"I just talked to Brookwine and Winebrook. Primul is moving

on."

Startled, Kern turned to see Listle step out of a wall, her ruby pendant flashing.

"Won't you ever get tired of that trick?" he asked in a perturbed voice.

She thought about it for a moment. "Probably not," she decided.

Suddenly her words struck him. "What did you mean, Primul is 'moving on'?"

Listle sighed. "He and the two mages are going to find a new hiding place. Sifahir's minion came too close for comfort. It's only a matter of time until another one of his servants discovers the grove in the forest. Primul wants to make certain he's long gone by then."

A coldness gathered in the pit of Kern's stomach. "Are you ... are you going with him?"

She regarded him curiously with her brilliant eyes. "Do you want me to, Kern?"

"I want you to be safe, Listle. If that mage—"

She interrupted him. "That wasn't what I asked."

He thought for a long moment. "No," he said finally. "I want you to stay, Listle."

"Good," she said with a laugh. "Because you're stuck with me, Kern Desanea."

He wasn't certain if he had just received a prize or a prison sentence. Kern had learned on his journey that there was more to the diminutive elf than met the eye.

Much more. And something told him he had only scratched the surface. But no matter what surprises she held for him, or what secrets she kept, he knew now that there would always be a place for her in his heart.

"I don't think I'm ever going to figure you out, Listle," he said finally, shaking his head in exasperation.

"No," she said musingly, "I don't suppose you ever will."

With that, she stood on her tiptoes and kissed him fleetingly. Then, with a flicker of her ruby pendant, she vanished

through the stone wall, leaving him alone.

For a long while he stared outside into the gathering night. An image came to him, of a dark tower rising above a storm-swept sea. He shivered.

"I'll never let Sifahir hurt you again, Listle," he whispered to the night. "By my oath as a paladin, never."

He turned his back on the darkened window, returning to warm firelight and companionship.

* * * * *

It was late.

The moon rose over Phlan, veiling the city in gossamer light. Everyone in Denlor's Tower was asleep, except for two figures that stood upon a high balcony, braving the cold winter night.

"What now?" Evaine asked softly.

She seemed to be questioning herself as much as her companion. Her long hair shone in the pale moonlight. The sorceress was not a pretty woman in any conventional sense, but the pearly illumination lent a softness to her sharp features and piercing eyes.

"We've both been granted second chances, Evaine," Miltiades replied. "I suppose we both have to decide what to do with them."

Evaine marveled at the paladin's rich voice, so warm and burnished, now that the sepulchral echo was gone.

"But I have decided." She turned to face him. The cold wind tangled his long dark hair. Gods, but he was handsome, she thought. But it was not his strong features that enthralled her. It was his eyes, as dark as his hair, and brimming with vitality.

"There are still pools in Faerun, Miltiades," she went on. "I can't give up my quest now."

He nodded in perfect understanding.

"I, too, have quests to finish," he said softly. "Though they may be centuries old."

The sorceress smiled crookedly. The two were silent for a

time. Suddenly Evaine shivered, the winter chill creeping into her bones. Gently, Miltiades drew her to him. Once before, she had tried to embrace him, and the chill had numbed her fingers. But this time his touch was warm and welcome.

"Our quests may not be over," she murmured. "But maybe... maybe this once we can leave them until tomorrow."

"Until tomorrow," he echoed.

Their embrace grew tighter, fiercer. Then, arm in arm, they stepped inside, shutting out the darkness behind them.

Moments later, a figure stirred in the shadows.

Gamaliel moved into the moonlight. A faint smile touched the barbarian man's lips. Suddenly his form blurred. A tawny cat vanished stealthily into the night, leaving the balcony empty.